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CONNECTING: THE USE OF INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION  
TECHNOLOGIES BY OLDER ADULTS IN A RETIREMENT COMMUNITY

BY

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DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

This is a long-term study of the use of information and communication technologies by 30 older adults (ages 70–97) living in a large retirement community. The study spanned the years of 1996 to 2008, during which time the research participants grappled with the challenges of computer use while aging 12 years. The researcher, herself a ‘mature learner,’ used a qualitative research design which included observations and open-ended interviews. Using a strategy of “intermittent immersion,” she spent an average of two weeks per visit on site and participated in the lives of the research population in numerous ways, including service as their computer tutor. With e-mail and telephone contact, she was able to continue her interactions with participants throughout the 12-year period. A long-term perspective afforded the view of the evolution, devolution or cessation of the technology use by these older adults, and this process is chronicled in detail through five individual “profiles.”

Three research questions dominated the inquiry: What function do computers serve in the lives of older adults? Does computer use foster or interfere with social ties? Is social support necessary for success in the face of challenging learning tasks? In answer to the first question, it became clear that computers were valued as a symbol of competence and intelligence. Some individuals brought their computers with them when transferred to the single-room residences of assisted living or nursing care facilities. Even when use had ceased, their computers were displayed to signal that their owners were or had once been keeping up to date. In answer to the second question, computer owners socialized *around* computing use (with in-person family members or friends) more than, or as much as, they socialized *through* their computers in the digital realm of the Internet. And in answer to the third question, while the existence of social support did facilitate computer exploration, more important was the social support network generated and developed among fellow computer users.

*I dedicate this work to my son Forest, who though he did not live to see this achievement, cheered me on for years, knowing that the day would eventually come; and to Nona who, without knowing it, inspires me every day to aim for the impossible*

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## PREFACE

This dissertation is based on an ethnographic study of the uses of ‘technology’ in an American retirement community of older adults which I conducted from 1996 through 2008. In this research, ‘older adult’ refers to individuals over the age of 70. Because I have followed their lives for more than a decade, the individuals in my study were in their mid-80s to late 90s at the ‘conclusion’ of my active data gathering. Under the rubric of technology I include a variety of devices that were used by the residents in this community to assist their survival *and* thrival. The technologies on which I primarily focused were computers and, secondarily, other communication and/or information gathering devices.

Whenever I mention the subject of my doctoral research to inquisitive individuals, I am always met with a grandmother/father story involving computers. Some of these vignettes have a happy tone; others are a mini saga of failure, disappointment, and even anger. In the U.S., we continually hear or read the reports of statistical surveys (by the Pew and Harris organizations, for example) on the use by Senior Citizens of information-communication (I-C) technologies ranging from owning computers to using their various applications, including the recent trend in social networking programs. When I listen to the grandparents-with-computers anecdotes and read the survey reports I find myself trying to imagine what really happens *after* the parents and grandchildren donate their old computer devices to their elders. Just what is going on in the dwellings of older Americans? What resources for learning about I-C technology are available for the individual who is well beyond the traditional school age? Distilling my research inquiry into its leanest form, it is: ‘then what?’

This is the question I have been considering while observing and participating in the lives of some Senior individuals who were attempting to achieve competence in the use of complex technologies. Since I have collected two file cabinets worth of data (in the form of transcripts of hundreds of hours of tape recorded interviews and supplementary materials), it has become necessary to carve out just a portion of my study for this dissertation. The most detailed presentation of data pertains to the most recent period of research which took place in the fall of 2008. However, in order to supply history and context for this recent time period I have also included shorter descriptions of preceding research interactions that took place over more than a decade. Realistically, only small segments of any given life can be portrayed, especially when

viewed over a long stretch of time. Nevertheless, a major goal of this dissertation is to provide sufficiently descriptive detail to depict the passage of time during which the evolution, stagnation or devolution of I-C technology occurred. An equally important objective is to share with a readership the thoughts and wisdom that these individuals shared with me.

I would be tempted to say that my research is not theory-driven were it not for the fact that some scholars have insisted that there is no such thing as the absence of theory. If I have a guiding theory (or set of assumptions), then, it is one that I have developed over years of psychological and anthropological study, research and work. It is that human beings, with their large brains, look for (or manufacture) problems to solve. Optimally these problems and challenges should be meaningful in their eyes. Based on such a theory, a plausible hypothesis would be that older citizens approach the daunting world of info-communication technologies—most especially the tasks entailed in using computers—in no small part because they crave what they perceive to be a meaningful challenge. I do not use the term *crave* lightly. The period of retirement is a critical one in the life cycle. It can thrust an individual into a void of structurelessness wherein s/he falters as a result of too much time with too few challenges. We are familiar with the incidents of unexpected deaths following close upon the cessation of working or the death of a spouse. These dramatic life changes typically result in a sudden reduction of an individual's need to accomplish, to produce or to care for others. This process was cogently expressed in July, 2009, by the astronaut, Buzz Aldrin, when he described—forty years after the fact—what happened in his life after he returned from walking on the moon.

My inclination was to return back to the Air Force that I came from and be the commander of the cadets at the Air Force Academy. The Air Force already had somebody in mind and so I decided to retire, and I was left, for the first time, with a very unstructured life, and frankly, things began to come apart. . . . I had inherited tendencies for addictive substances—alcoholism—and clearly that began to predominate in my unstructured life. I thrived on the assignment to be involved in mission planning to cover most of the eventualities in Apollo, so that we could return to Earth safely. And I was left without goals to pursue, without a team to work with, and I had to begin recovery from that. That's a long process, and it's a process that has you make changes in your life. (Aldrin 2009)

Two other important components of my theoretical set of assumptions are that (1) ideally there should be plausible means for re/solving the problems and challenges sought or confronted, and (2) such solutions are best provided within the context of social support. These are the issues that lie at the core of my research and comprise the subject of this dissertation.

**PART I: INTRODUCTION**  
**CHAPTER 1**  
**CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS**

**A. Cultural Context**

A significant and shared experience for all humans is growing older. I am interested in knowing what this is like in America. What is the quality of life for our oldest citizens and how can we define and measure this idea? There are many ways to approach such a large topic but we know, at the very least, that there are basic needs that must be satisfied for a human being to survive, involving shelter, sustenance and bodily care, for example. And there must be a state beyond mere survival in which an individual can attest to being satisfied with the quality of her/his life—a state of *thrival*.

Thriving is an ongoing process of utilizing one's talents, capabilities, knowledge and ingenuity in the interest of attaining a meaningful goal, solving a relevant problem, fulfilling a wish. In order to *thrive*, a person requires cognitive stimulation and development through some process of rearing, training or education. This notion of thrival is one way of conceptualizing the issue of life quality. This is an important question for our society as the number of individuals aged 65 and over is expected to rise dramatically in the coming decades. There are serious policy decisions to be made regarding the support systems that we will need for our aging population to be able to both survive *and* thrive.

**B. Research Focus, Broad and Specific**

In assessing aspects of the quality of life of the elderly, I propose that *informed engagement* is a key element in thrival. The engagement is in and to one's culture, which may range from one's immediate family to one's society. To begin with, I examined how individuals aged 70 and above obtained the information they needed to enable them to conduct their lives in a way that they identified as satisfactory. Obtaining needed information may be a challenge for aging individuals for at least two reasons. The first is *intrinsic* to individual development and concerns bodily capabilities. Being in poor health obviously makes every aspect of daily functioning difficult. But even with reasonably good health, the aging process often entails a diminution of sensory functioning: compromised eyesight and hearing, for example. As these

conditions worsen, access to normal communication channels may be limited. How do the elderly obtain information to even meet their daily life needs, particularly when communication with others becomes difficult? A second aspect of obtaining information is a kind of access problem that is *extrinsic* to individuals: that of changing societal conditions. With regard to information resources, we are confronted by rapidly evolving technologies that are permeating every aspect of our lives. Automated and digitized technologies do not merely extend and expand existing technology. They require new approaches and operating skills that entail steep learning curves. How do these learning challenges impact the lives of elderly citizens? Are they being left out of a variety of information loops and why does it matter?

The other important focus of my research has been that of social support. We observe that humans, as gregarious beings, acquire, from their earliest ages, new skills within contexts of support networks and institutions. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that having the help of others eases the difficulties of learning new tasks, especially when the tasks are unusually challenging and/or when the learner is in a vulnerable state of being. Our Senior citizens are often vulnerable for three major reasons:

- Retirement can be a precarious period for those who find themselves suddenly and uncomfortably lacking structure to their days or bereft of ‘important’ things to do.
- Aging involves a gradual—or swift—decline in physical, emotional and mental capacities (which may be further complicated by an impoverishment of resources for some).
- Moving through the life course often entails significant changes/losses in one’s immediate support system, (typically through death and illness) as well as one’s larger support (through either voluntary or forced relocation).

Tackling the new language of information technology is an unusually challenging task for individuals who may be well past the critical learning period for acquiring new skills. It follows then, that for older citizens, having social support should be an important factor in their willingness to try to learn to speak, for example, ‘computerese.’

### **C. Research Questions**

The primary question posed in this research is: what role do information-communication technologies play in the lives of older adults? A series of ancillary questions arise when considering this major question: For each Senior Citizen who finds her/himself staring at, for example, a computing machine, we could ask,

- How does s/he get started?
- Who provides connectedness?
- Whom does the user turn to for help?
- How long is interest sustained?
- What happens when the roadblocks of physical/mental decline are added on?
- What is the superficial/initial motivation for starting, and
- What is the deeper underlying motivation that is critical for persevering (against great odds in some cases) in the use of new communication technologies?

#### **D. Assumptions and Moral Rationale Underlying this Research**

The following propositions are the philosophical assumptions about human nature that I brought to this study and around which I built my research design.

- Homo sapiens have enormous brains that seem to thrive on problem solving. The biggest enemies of the human brain are under stimulation and prolonged inactivity. In the absence of meaningful activity, humans wither and/or engage in destructive behaviors.
- Homo sapiens are a symboling species. We naturally communicate, create, represent, and produce. We understand phenomena external to ourselves through our symbolic expressions.
- Homo sapiens are an imitative species, learning survival strategies, cultural rules and meaning through observation. We are influenced by forces outside ourselves—other people and products; symbols, technology, events.
- Homo sapiens are a gregarious species. Being with others and sharing activity is, typically, a pleasant and comforting experience. We learn and grow through contact and interaction and jointly construct meaning.

Since we are born helpless, we are interdependent which means we must form a social contract to survive. But such a contract must also help us thrive; ideally our society owes us the means to contribute to it in a way that enhances the quality of our brief lives. It owes us safe lodging, bodily care, and education. It owes us the opportunity to satisfy the urgent human need to use our brains to their maximum potential. We owe our society the fruits of our capabilities as they were nurtured by it. We want and need to contribute to the greater good because we recognize that we are social animals, reliant upon the contributions of others. These cognitive and bodily needs of the citizenry must be attended to most intensively in childhood and in elderhood. None of these needs, especially cognitive growth, should be neglected. This is so until the

day we die. Each societal member has the right and responsibility to monitor and advise when parts of this contract are not fulfilled.

This set of assumptions informed my inquiry context in the following manner. Humans gravitate towards new experience, novel stimuli, and learning opportunities. What other people do is of intrinsic interest to us, so the inventions, products, and technologies that are widely used by others will arouse our curiosity. The optimal setting for coping with change and challenge is within a supportive group rather than in isolation. If you or I, as societal advisors, suspect that members of the society are being excluded from these experiences, especially in a systematic manner and as a result of their given attributes, it is our responsibility to investigate and call attention to this circumstance.

### **E. Approach**

I employed a qualitative approach in this research,

Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials—case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives. (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 3)

Qualitative research entails an *interactive* process of sense making. Understanding is mutually constructed in a collaborative process between researcher and participant and, ideally, knowledge emerges out of this collaboration. Using a combination of directed and open-ended interviews and conversations, I attempted to create opportunities for meaningful exchange of ideas. I embrace these epistemological underpinnings for this endeavor.

Only in a dialogical encounter with what is not understood, with what is alien, with what makes a claim upon us, can we open ourselves to risking and testing our preconceptions and prejudices. . . . Understanding is participative, conversational, and dialogic. It is always bound up with language and is achieved only through a logic of question and answer. . . . Moreover, understanding is something that is *produced* in that dialogue, not something *reproduced* by an interpreter through an analysis of that which he or she seeks to understand. The meaning one seeks in 'making sense' of a social action or text is temporal and progressive and always coming into being in the specific occasion of understanding. (Schwandt 2000, 195)

A researcher of the elderly must be sensitive to health concerns such as stamina, mobility and pain. Changes in cognitive functions such as difficulties in word recall, lack of focus, and the confusion of over stimulation, call for patience and flexible approaches to communication. By modulating the pitch and pace of my speech, I was able, for example, to communicate with individuals with severe hearing losses.

Unlike gender and race, advanced age is not an attribute with which anyone is born. In youth-oriented America, its accumulation is not generally regarded as wealth and its acquisition is greeted ambiguously. Aging, however, is the one experience that all citizens will, in the normal course of things, share as an inescapable part of the life cycle. I posit that once one is 'in' old age, it becomes, as an experiential state, the paramount personal attribute, reducing the valence of all others, including race, gender, class and sexual orientation. This is not to say that the aforementioned attributes will not play a major role in how individuals cope with being aged. Indeed, the opportunities or missed opportunities inherent in such memberships will certainly influence how older citizens approach learning new tasks, for example. But, no matter what privileges one's birth or life course might have afforded one, advanced old age threatens each of us with a less desirable status and condition, if not outright oppression and discrimination.

In contemporary approaches to qualitative research, the researcher's role and identity are foregrounded as a critical component of the situation. Within a research context, the researcher may, for example, "consciously adopt" or "negotiate" an identity with participants (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). In my experience, it is a blend of these choices. Additionally, any researcher has unalterable characteristics that s/he carries into the research setting. If the assumptions in the previous paragraph are valid, the most salient aspect of my self in this inquiry context was *my* age. I was at the start of my research an incipient Senior citizen and beginning to experience the types of physical changes that can challenge information processing. My chronological maturity and identification with older citizens carries with it patience, empathy, and understanding that may be lacking in younger researchers. The attitude of older individuals towards me as a female seemed to be one of chivalrous protectiveness by men and trust by women. Elderly women and men experience increasing feelings of vulnerability, which makes them wary of strangers; females are viewed as less threatening than males. Thus, my gender would seem to be a positive factor within a population of elderly citizens. I shared a (middle) class and (Caucasian) race membership with the members of my research population. As a comparative junior in life experience, I could be considered as mildly subordinate in rank to the elders with whom I interacted. Thus, the potential for power and intimidation within the research dyad was muted.

During the last several decades the researcher role in qualitative studies has gradually freed itself from its objectivist shadows and moved into the light of subjective self-awareness

and even involvement with research participants. An intermediate position in the course of this evolving view of the researcher was expressed thus,

The task . . . is to witness again and again, but not to use the data gathered this way in intervention. Rather, the fieldworker observes to write. . . . This freedom from intervention and from ordinary interaction allows fieldworkers their special purchase on social life. (Bosk 1992, 17)

In sharp contrast to this researcher's stance, I did/do practice intervention (and have done so since my earliest field work in the late 1960s) in the course of my research. In this research setting of Flamingo Park, such intervention occurred as computing help, talks on technology development, information gathering on behalf of residents, advising and counseling, food provision, assistance in daily living tasks and so on. But there is more to *self* in the field than the "role of self" embraced by the researcher. The research participants create their own versions of a researcher's self, which is what Reinharz (1997) calls "situationally created selves" (5).

Although the researcher may consider 'being a researcher' one's most salient self, community members may not agree. . . . [The]. . . 'brought' and 'created' selves are those that are relevant to the people being studied, [and] they shape or obstruct the relationships that the researcher can form and hence the knowledge that can be obtained. Thus, these selves affect the researcher's ability to conduct research. (3-4)

In Flamingo Park various unexpected selves were created for me by residents. For two of the single men with whom I interacted (Laslo U. and Dr. Q), I became an object of comfort and affection; for two individuals (Will M. and Myrtle L.), I became a painful reminder of their lapsed computer use and they expressed hesitation about meeting with me once this had occurred. Sue J. (unknown to her husband, Nelson, who did not share her feelings) began to see me in a negative light as my close alliance with Barbara H. became apparent (since they had had some sort of falling out), and she eventually refused continued participation. And for Barbara H., my most cogent self was as her son's university colleague and, next, as her private computer tutor. For Al S., I was primarily a student (a role which he greatly respected), and he instructed me in new technologies. Reinharz views these multiple selves as potential opportunities for understanding and concludes, "The researcher does not know in advance what attributes will be meaningful" (1997, 18).

## **F. Background History of this Research**

This research project grew out of earlier studies I devised as part of two GSLIS courses (with Ann Bishop and Greg Newby) on "Prairie Net Usability" and "Information Needs," in 1996-97. For these courses, I conducted interviews on the use of computers, free nets and



information needs. First, I focused on the residents of one block in a Mid-western neighborhood, and, while doing so, found myself drawn to the stories of the oldest residents. “Neighborhood Information Needs” (Linton 1996) was my preliminary report on this first phase of the study. Subsequently, in Phase II, I conducted interviews on the same topics with five residents in a senior citizen retirement community in a southerly state. This research was reported in “Computer Use by Senior Citizens” (Linton 1997). Since the time of those initial contacts, I have continued to interact with both research populations, keeping abreast of their lives. In the retirement community, I continued, in a researcher role, to conduct interviews with interested residents. Eventually, they began asking me to share my insights with them. Their requests and interest in this research played a major role in my decision to formalize my study and to seek guidance in the analysis of my collected data. And since the 1996 study, the scope of this research has broadened to include many other aspects of I-C technology in addition to information access.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **A. Research Population and Setting**

I conducted this research in a large residential community (which I renamed “Flamingo Park”) designed exclusively for individuals aged 62 and over. Most of the individuals living in the “Park” had their own private homes or apartments and in that sense were, at the time of this research, representative of Americans over age 65, nine out of ten of whom lived independently. On the other hand, only one in ten of all Americans over the age of 65 lived in age-segregated communities; over age 80 this number was 20%. In that respect Flamingo Park residents were not representative of their age cohort, according to a Pew survey (Horrigan 2009).

Within this population of approximately 1000 people, I found a range of life styles and attributes along dimensions of educational and occupational backgrounds, interests, ages (62 – 100+), physical condition, abilities and marital/partnership status. Several residents estimated the average formal educational attainment of Park residents as one to two years of college. Among those individuals with no formal post-secondary education, I encountered some who had attained the equivalent of professional positions through on-the-job training. The members of this community were financially comfortable, so for most of them the issue of affordability with regard to technological devices was mitigated.

In summary, my research setting was:

- A self-contained retirement community with a large population.
- A total life care facility that had several stages of living support.
- A community in which various kinds of social support were provided.
- A setting that acknowledged interest in new communication technologies in the lives of its members as manifested by special (though limited) facilities for computing equipment; and/or living spaces designed for technology connectivity.
- A population that had the economic means to explore relatively expensive technological devices and practices.

Entrée into this setting was afforded through previously established relationships with members of the town of “Dry Springs” in which the Park was located. I had been visiting residents of that town since the 1970s and residents at the Park since the early 1990s. In 1995-96, a few Park residents formed a computer club for the express purpose of exploring this new

technology. I met a club member in October, 1996, while visiting in the Park and was invited to a meeting. Thus began what became an ongoing interaction with some of the residents who were aspiring computer users. Thirty-six individuals aged 70 and above were willing over the course of twelve years to share their thoughts and feelings with me about the culture of Flamingo Park and the role of I-C technologies in their lives. Before my attendance at the Computer Club, I had never met any of these research participants. In myriad ways—observing, listening, talking, and working together on computers—these individuals and I tried to understand and describe how they used various resources to accomplish their goals, meet their needs, and enhance their lives. A critical part of my self-identity in this setting was that of a commiserating mature learner who first began to explore computing systems in her mid-fifties. I am an enthusiastic champion of life-long learning but also profoundly aware of the serious challenge posed by continuously evolving technologies. Initially, I brought to the research a good understanding of how to explain, teach and discuss information technologies as a result of my personal educational experiences. As time went on, however, I found the pace of technological developments threatening to undermine my “tech expertise.”

### **B. Frequency and Intensity of Contact**

A good way to explore research issues is to share the lived experiences of the individuals who are involved with them and living in their community is an ideal means of doing so; this process is referred to as “fieldwork.” Some researchers, on the other hand, elect not to live in the field, a fact that led one scholar to ask, “What happens to fieldworkers who now ask questions but no longer hang out” with the research participants? (Kleinman, Stenross and McMahon 1994, 38). They was concerned with the differing end products, “field studies favor a social-organizational analysis, while interview studies favor a social-psychological analysis” (47). As a researcher in the field of anthropology, I have experienced and enthusiastically support the practice of immersive fieldwork, the “prolonged engagement” and “persistent observation” described by Guba and Lincoln (1989). Such fieldwork, according to another researcher, “allows us to describe a set of fundamental life experiences as they occur—it provides us with words to inscribe the arc of human experience . . . it allows us to see the embedded tensions that lie beneath the surface” (Bosk 1992, 18).

However, there may be another way to observe this arc of experience and that is using the method of *intermittent immersion*. This is a form of contact that I was forced to devise to accommodate the personal circumstances of both the elderly users in my study and myself. This model involved repeated, short but intensive contact, over a period of years. There is no way to stipulate with what frequency such shorter contacts should ideally occur, given the multitude of factors such as location, population, purpose of study or research methods. Different frequencies would yield different but nonetheless interesting findings. One researcher who returned to her field site after a prolonged absence learned that the participants in her study did not have the happy endings that she had anticipated. Her understanding was “challenged by fundamental changes in the [participants’] circumstances” and she had to reconsider how to frame her initial description with “the possibility of challenging the expected ending” (Coffey 1996, 67-8).

If we are truly to see the arc of human experience, a longitudinal perspective is required and since most researchers cannot remain in the ‘field’ for a dozen years, intermittent visits have much to recommend them. Other advantages of repeated contacts of a shorter duration as compared with lengthy stays are:

- Refreshing one’s view of context (adaptation can dull the vision).
- Creating a finite time frame in which all parties are more alert to the need to schedule meetings, interviews, joint activities and to be more task oriented.
- Increasing intensity of thought and understanding through shorter, limited time periods (which can’t be sustained for long periods).
- Changes are set into relief; this is especially relevant in research which involves steep learning curves (= slow progress) for individuals.
- Providing interim periods in which to percolate ideas, hypotheses.
- Discovering missing data.
- Providing opportunity to observe how study participants deal with long-distance communication (such as e-mail, for instance) which is relevant in a study of novice computer users.

My intermittent visits to Flamingo Park, averaged once a year and lasted from one to two weeks. (See Figure 1 at the end of this chapter for an overview of interview times.) Since, during these visits, I was invited to reside with various residents, I was always in the midst of ongoing Park activity and immersed in the life of the Park.

## C. Methods of Data Collection

### 1. Participant Observation

Participant observation is the sine qua non of many researchers' approach to qualitative research but as both theory and method it is a phrase in need of freshening up. Although participant observation involves the salutary aspect of being *with* people rather than standing on the sidelines looking *at* them, the phrase still has a unidirectional ring to it, as if the researcher were driving the action, participating and observing at her pleasure. In my experience in Flamingo Park, to the contrary, the process was a bi- or multi-dimensional one, in which I observed and participated at the pleasure of the residents. What's more, they observed me and participated in both my research and personal worlds. The first act of observation of me was by Barbara Howard, Park resident. She had been watching me in a Park setting and evidently decided that I was of interest to her. She approached and interrogated me, asking my name, residence, purpose in Park, occupation and interests. After realizing there was a commonality between me and her son, a fellow researcher at the University of Illinois, she decided that I was a worthy person, a scholar. She then invited me to join her in a Park activity. (A few years later, when she invited me to stay with her many more observational opportunities presented themselves.) My participation in the inner worlds of Park life was *created* by residents who invited me into their homes where they agreed to participate in my questioning. Each time I visited the Park, I was recruited by members to give a talk to the Computer Club so that they could pick my brain on tech issues. In subsequent visits, more people volunteered to participate—all with their own reasons. Later, Park residents continued to actively participate in *and shape* my study when they suggested people I should talk to and recruited them without my knowing it, as Barbara did with the Normans (the lonely Mac users). Al Swenson set up some dinner meals with people he thought I would find interesting. Barbara made suggestions as to categories she thought were missing from my questionnaire. During my last visit, Barbara set up a meeting with her personal computer tutor, Stugis Johnson, with no input from me. Thus, within the research context of Flamingo Park, the plane of interaction was predominantly horizontal.

As described above, research participants were selected on the basis of what Patton described as "opportunistic" and "snowballing" sampling strategies (1990, 183). In addition, I also occasionally used a "criterion" strategy as when I intentionally sought out any Mac computer users, for example. Finding study participants among the residents of Flamingo Park

was constrained by several factors, including ability, willingness and interest. Some individuals stated that they were busier in retirement than when employed. Some people left Dry Springs for the summer and returned to their northern residences. The major holiday season from November to December was not an ideal time to try to set up formal meetings because it was prime visiting time for distant family members. Some retirees had firmly fixed schedules for managing their daily lives and did not easily incorporate new things into them. In actuality, therefore, my participant population was mainly self-selecting. If I wanted to catch up with participants, and in order to experience all seasonal activities of Flamingo Park, I needed to be in Dry Springs during certain periods of the calendar year. As a researcher, I visited the Park in every month except April, June and December.

## *2. Observation*

As the name implies, a major element of participant observation is observing which in a research context entails more than simply watching people. The complexities of the process were described by Wolcott who recommended strategies for observing (look at everything, look at nothing in particular, look for paradoxes and/or look for key problems). But how do we make sense of what we have observed?

When ethnographers talk about observing human social behavior they are talking about actions *and* their meaning. It is those meanings that confound our capacity to observe human behavior. The problem is rooted not in the fact that we do not know what other people mean but that as humans we are accustomed to supplying meanings of our own [emphasis in the original]. (Wolcott 1994,167)

According to my assumptions outlined earlier, humans are curious and stimulation seeking, imitative learners and gregarious, social beings. These principles underlie my hypotheses that older citizens (like younger ones) seek ways to keep themselves stimulated, are curious about new cultural trends and learn through observation of others in contexts of social support. To verify or test these assumptions, I needed to systematically observe the array of social contexts available to the individuals in my research population in order to learn where and how they obtained help and support. Also, I needed to observe individuals in their private residences since this was a primary locus of their efforts to use I-C technologies.

Another researcher identified differing approaches to the process of observation, such as, “descriptive,” “focused,” and “selective” (Angrosino and Mays de Perez 2000). In my research, observations were a combination of researcher-determined and resident-determined approaches and opportunities. Participants determined the time of day, the areas within their residences into

which I was invited and the family members to whom I was introduced. I wished to observe Park residents in a variety of settings and obtain a representative sample of their daily activity but I was reliant upon them to identify the appropriate contexts for such observations. On the other hand, I could, on my own, enter any number of public events and spaces in the Park. My goal, in doing so, was to observe a wide variety and representational sample of Park activities and events in order to understand the life context of the individuals whom I was interviewing.

Within this study, there were thus two alternating foci for observations: individual and institutional (the residential community). These foci are mutually intertwined and interactive though they may be separated out for the purpose of analysis and description. The observation of individuals most often took place within various spaces of the Park context. The institutional focus, then, is a means for understanding and situating individual behavior. The length of observation time that was focused on institutional phenomena varied widely, from fifteen minutes (to assess the collection scope of the library in a residence building or to observe the menu of a closed circuit TV channel) to several hours (for a Park event or an external trip). The objective was to observe a representative sample of park settings, events and activities. Other informal sampling occurred as I moved about the Park, where I could notice how things worked, such as, security procedures, facilities, transport, car ownership and so on. A more focused approach occurred in targeting and attending the events and activities that might be taking place during my stay in the Park and Dry Springs. Observations focused on individual phenomena varied in length, as well. Doing a “tech survey” might take only twenty minutes; observing computer use could take up to an hour or more. (Attending events with individuals overlapped the institutional focus, as described above.) I tried to observe the individual use of a computer at least two times, and the amount of lapsed time in between observations ranged from six months to two years, eight months. Follow-up observations were critical to understanding the ever-changing importance of technology in the life of each individual. It is with such spaced and selected observations that I was able to chronicle computer use as it unfolded. (An outline of observational settings for individual versus institutional foci is presented in Appendix A.)

Observation that took place during an instructional interaction, either in group settings or in individual residences, was noted openly and immediately with the understanding of the participants that I was describing their learning progress. I recorded these observations either as written notes or dictations into a tape recorder both in the presence of participants and later.

Observations involving informal conversations that occurred in either public or personal settings were noted immediately following an interaction. Observations were also made of the use of (or reaction to) technological devices that existed in the surrounding environment. The positioning and repositioning of technological devices in personal settings were noted. In some instances, I photographed (with permission) computer locations and setups. I occasionally sketched room and furniture layouts in public places. Logs or reports with analytic and methodological memos were generated for each formal observation episode.

In my Flamingo Park research, observing became increasingly important as the years went by and the articulation prowess and actual speaking ability of the participants waned. It was only due to our long association that I was able, for example, to fill in the gaps in Barbara Howard's utterances, which became more and more fragmented due to her partially paralyzed throat as well as her word recall difficulty. As words fall away, other means of communication become foregrounded, like body postures, facial expressions and hand gestures. Examples are Al Swenson's finger snapping to signify speed, Laslo Unterweg's finger drumming indicating restiveness and Barbara Howard's moving fingers to indicate relationship closeness.

### *3. Interviewing*

Initially, I asked for volunteers to talk with me about their information needs and their interest in new technologies of communication. That request was made at Computer Club meetings (by me and by club participants) and other social settings, and it was gradually disseminated by word of mouth. To those who identified themselves (by taking classes on or owning computers, for example) as interested in new information technologies, I offered individual tutoring and assistance in exchange for the opportunity to talk with them about their experiences. My promise for each session was to help individuals to accomplish at least one task on their list of computing interests or problems. Eventually, other opportunities for formal interviewing arose through casual conversations in social settings. Given time constraints, I mainly talked with those who were using or interested in new technologies although I recognized that talking with those who expressed distaste or disinterest in these phenomena would have provided valuable insights into perceived challenges and difficulties. Throughout twelve years I established ongoing relationships with several dozen individuals who shared with me their reflections on their evolving lives and the place of technology in them. About seventeen of those individuals were, at some point, active computer users. Interviews and conversations took place



in individual residences, public meeting areas, and local community settings to which I accompanied individuals. Most interviews were tape-recorded. When a tape recorder was not used (due to machine malfunctioning or sensitive circumstances) interviews were recorded in written notes during or subsequent to the conversation. For each interview I generated a “log” or interview report which included methodological and analytical memos.

There were constraints that occurred in the course of conducting these interviews. Conversing with those whose verbalization skills are apparently slowing entails careful consideration. Posing questions can be an unsatisfactory means of eliciting information because it puts the conversant on the spot. Rather, formulating inquiries as statements seems less demanding and allows the respondent to choose his preferred mode of speaking (commentary, seeking clarification, or even silence). One substitute for questioning is story swapping. For example, when I mentioned traveling to the Park by train, it prompted one participant to tell me that both he and his wife’s father had worked for the railroad at some time in their lives. I discovered the drawbacks to conversing with or interviewing more than one person at a time. Attention is sometimes diffused so that meaning cannot be quickly grasped, reacted to or followed up on. The interactional dynamic is markedly different and the individuals typically speak less frankly and/or shape their responses for the other participant. With couples, it can be difficult to tease apart the minds, opinions and words that have fused during long years together. One person can dominate and disrupt the train of thought of a slower respondent. And this applied to other multiple participant conversations, too, as when Barbara Howard’s tutor, Sturgis, spoke for her during our joint discussion.

In the initial stages of my study, I conducted semi-formal interviews, using topic guidelines (see Appendix B). As the study progressed and I became well acquainted with the participants, the interviews became unstructured and eventually assumed the nature of conversations. There are many components to consider in the interview process in addition to the social or class identities of the participants, like rapport, reciprocity, equity, and the nature of the relationship. There are debates on how much rapport should be sought or established. Some interviewers advocate for an “I-Thou” relationship between interviewer/interviewee, which has the potential of turning into a “We” relationship. Others see the disadvantages: “In [a full ‘We’ relationship] the interviewer would become an equal participant, and the resulting discourse would become a conversation, not an interview.” In such a relationship the “question of whose

experience is being related and whose meaning is being made is critically confounded” (Seidman 1991, 73). Seidman advises, “If the interviewer has created a full ‘We’ relationship in the process of interviewing, then he or she must be prepared to deal with the consequences” (76). And he warns against the temptation to act as a therapist in such a close relationship, “The researcher is there to learn, not to treat the participant” (81). Although Seidman expressed these sentiments nearly two decades ago, there are many researchers who would agree with him and who would criticize the nature of my relationship with some of the residents of Flamingo Park, which clearly became a We relationship through interactions over a dozen years. And, as he advises, I am prepared to take the consequences in terms of both research and ongoing relationships.

#### *4. Surveys*

The two ‘surveys’ I employed in the course of this study were actually an inventory and a question guide. Both of these research instruments served as starting points in an interview and provided structure for conversations that might have been flagging or lacking direction.

- The Tech Survey provided a context of technology and appliance use that reveals comfort levels with previous technologies and indicates possible previous training for newer technologies.
- The Information Resources Survey established a basic level of information needs and resources and familiarity with computing technologies, as well as possible support resources (see Appendix C).

#### *5. Artifacts*

People *do* as well as say. By examining the material traces of behavior, we gain a different kind of understanding than that afforded through conversing. Thus, the products of technological use provided an important source of information in this research context. What do the Senior users of computing technologies do with their computers? Their individual and joint creations such as greeting cards, stories, reports, email and flyers, are rich data that their creators were willing to share with me. As a sometime participant in the Computer Club, I received e-mails from various members. One of the Club co-leaders, who served as a storyteller for the group, included my name on his lengthy mailing list so I received his many jokes, words of advice, and social commentary. Within these hundreds of messages there were many revealing narrative threads. According to Hodder (2000) these artifacts can be analyzed as representations of ideas and/or as evocations of sets of practices. Knowing what individuals do with various technologies provides insight into many aspects of their lives. The popularity of creating greeting

cards with computer programs to send through the regular postal service is a good example of the melding of the new and the older familiar technologies in the lives of Seniors.

#### *6. Researcher Role*

Within the Flamingo Park research setting, I was, among other roles, an advocate and helping agent for residents. If I identified a need that I could meet or a problem I could resolve, I did so. I lent my services to the improvement of individuals' circumstances in a variety of ways, ranging from addressing their bodily needs (bandaging a sprained ankle, helping to wipe the face and brow after an unexpected incident of vomiting, doing the laundry for an immobile individual, buying food treats for a house-bound individual and so on), to serving as their personal computer tutors who worked with them for hours on technological mishaps. These intimate interactions arose naturally out of my background experiences as practical nurse, care taker, counselor, teacher and sometime clinical psychologist. Such personal involvement has positive and negative consequences. Benefits for research participants (as well as my research) include the following:

- My interest in them has encouraged and supported their efforts to explore computing technologies.
- I have been able to pass along some useful information and techniques for computing.
- In addition to adding to their technological support system, I have in several cases added to their social support system and become a friend.
- For however brief a time, I was able to assuage the loneliness of some residents and to provide them with stimulating conversation.
- By embroiling myself in the affairs of Park residents, I learned (among other things) about their willingness to help their fellow residents and about available resources.

Such well-intended involvement, however, can have negative consequences, as well.

- Fostering a dependency on me which, given my physical distance from the Park, is difficult to address or ameliorate.
- Becoming a part of their lives in such major ways can heavily influence and alter 'data.'
- Becoming attached to Park residents results in profound sadness for me when they suffer health crises and, eventually, die. It has been heartbreaking to witness the sorry state of affairs that some of my acquaintances have experienced once they moved into the Nursing Care Center. This, in turn, has resulted in feelings of guilt for not doing more to improve their circumstances.

Thus, these are the circumstances I will be addressing for the foreseeable future as a result of the relationship I have with the residents of Flamingo Park.

#### **D. Informed Consent**

It seemed to be well known by any Park residents with whom I interacted that I was studying the use of computers and working towards a degree in a computer-related field of study at a major university. Several people in the Park had relatives who have attended my university and/or were then affiliated with it and they were always eager to mention this. When I was being introduced by my Park acquaintances to other residents, these were the facts that were often stated about me in the introduction.

Before any formal interview, I gave interviewees a consent form to read and asked them to sign it. I provided them with a copy which I either gave to them at that time or sent to them along with a thank you note a week or two after leaving the Park. A few interviewees evidenced an initial wariness when handed a form to sign but no one refused to sign or questioned the function of signed consent after my explanation of its purpose. A few individuals had difficulty reading the print on the forms, and I read the words to them. Over the years, I modified the consent forms slightly. The Institutional Review Board of the University of Illinois placed this research project in an “exempt” status at its inception through a subsequent review in 2008. Consonant with the provisions of the consent forms, I have assigned pseudonyms for all personal, place, and local institutional names which might reveal the identity or location of participants. (See Consent Forms samples in Appendix D.)

#### **E. Analysis of Research Data**

##### *1. Classic and Alternate Methods*

Being guided by content rather than method is at the heart of qualitative inquiry. I did not restrict myself to any particular analytical methods. One method that I initially tried in a very limited manner was “grounded theory” which entails a set of procedures that typically take place throughout the data collection period. One of its techniques is the extraction, from data such as interview transcriptions, of concepts through the application of coding words that are then chunked into categories, taxonomies, and eventually themes. Category examples might be “the use of computers in daily life” or the “physical placement of computers” or “meanings of ‘old.’” In this method, repeated data collecting involves repeated “sampling to refine the researcher’s emerging theoretical ideas” (Charmaz 2000, 510-11) which was an approach that I found too constricting of focus. My revised version (not actually a grounded theory technique) of the idea

of purposeful sampling was to do a kind of *topic* sampling. Thus, in each return to the research site I tried to gather information on current cultural events (like Y2K or social networking) that might be impacting the participants' computer use. Eventually, I came to agree with the critics of grounded theory/analysis that the "fracturing" of data (into codes and chunks) fostered a preoccupation with analysis at the cost of "the portrayal of subjects' experience in its fullness." Small wonder that this might occur given the fact that this method was originally created "to help the researcher avoid . . . unconsciously adopting subjects' perspective" (Charmaz 2000, 521). Nor was I tempted to use computer programs designed to carry out such coding and categorization. To the extent that they rely on word frequency as a measure of relevance, such programs could indeed find salient categories which in my data were "time," "change," and "frustration," for example. But how would a computer program recognize the significance of a single utterance (such as "apple") for the person who spoke it?

Rather than dividing the data into convenient parts, I found that I had to treat it holistically. The analysis or understanding of data as voluminous as mine became a multi-stage, multi-sensory process in which I lived and then relived the field experience through all the senses. Some of the oft-repeated steps of doing this are:

- Read transcripts, field notes and other textual artifacts.
- Listen to the spoken words on the tapes to glean meanings through intonations, misstatements, pauses, hesitations, laughter and other nonverbal utterances.
- See in the mind's eye the gestures and body language surrounding the words and thoughts.
- Reflect on these sensations with cognitive apprehension and begin to recognize the emergence of meaning (participants' concerns, insights, successes) and to extract understanding through artful absorption of data.
- Write from this comprehensive, informed understanding.

## *2. Writing as Analysis and Knowing*

"Writing is . . . a way of 'knowing'—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it" (Richardson 2000, 923). "Metaphor," she insists, "is the backbone of social science writing."

Metaphors organize social scientific work and affect the interpretations of the 'facts'; indeed, facts are interpretable ('make sense') only in terms of their place within a metaphoric structure. The 'sense making' is always value constituting—making sense in a particular way, privileging one ordering of the 'facts' over others. (Richardson 926, 27)

Richardson describes classic sets of metaphors regarding theory building as in the use, for example, of the concepts of foundation, support, constructing, buttressing, shoring up, framework, and scaffolding; other popular metaphor types involve combat and sports. Those introduced by some feminist researchers describe “theory as story” in which the boundary between narrative and analysis dissolves (927). Richardson advises writers to examine their own metaphors and to reflect on the ways in which they may have shaped the research process. Only by re-reading transcripts of the interviews with Park residents did I realize that the source and meaning of my metaphors are situated in my life-long preoccupation with travel (journey, path, route, road, movement) and restoration (dig, unearth, reveal, explore, peel away, uncover excavate, mine, plumb depths). These metaphors, used both to elicit and comment on the utterances of Park interviewees, shaped our mutual perceptions of meaning and understanding. My aim is not to build towards truth but to unearth it.

Writing serves many functions—rumination, exploration, analysis, and creation—but it is not without peril, as one ethnographer long ago reminded us.

Writing is both empowering (a necessary, effective way of storing and manipulating knowledge) and corrupting (a loss of immediacy, of the face-to-face communication . . . of the presence and intimacy of speech). (Clifford 1986, 118)

Knowing this, we can strive to keep manipulation and corruption to a minimum.

### *3. Narratives*

“Personal experience narratives,” including reminiscences, are of special interest in the lives of older adults (see Mullen 1992), and the residents in Flamingo Park were eager to tell them. By narrative I refer to the stories not only of the Park residents, but also to the personal narrative of the researcher which has to be accounted for in the interactive process of qualitative research (see Pratt, 1983). There are many kinds of narrative forms used to describe the reminiscences of the elderly and many different ways of representing experience and individual reality. Through careful attention to these forms one can discern the distillation of significant life events. In lieu of formal terminology, I have begun to use the phrases “emblematic tales” and “totems of technology” to describe little nuggets of revelation that I have encountered while sharing time and thought with Flamingo Park residents. They weave in and out of this research and could benefit from more systematic exploration in the future. Following are examples of this narrative form that emerged in my conversations with the residents of the Park.

Neva Evans' repeated the sentence about her husband's utterance ("I plan to leave this world computer illiterate. and he did!") so often in front of so many that it assumed a significance beyond that of an anecdote. It seemed like an encapsulation of a deep truth about their relationship that expressed her disappointment over his failure to keep up with the changing times and with her. In a similar vein, Al Swenson used the word, "patches," to encapsulate a deeply felt experience he had had of connecting military personnel to members of the civilian population from whom they were separated (he often mentioned "sweethearts"). He used "patches" not only to reminisce but also to explain the start of his technological journey in communications—a journey that culminated in Skype-ing. Nelson Jones expressed the turning point in his understanding and interest in computers with the gesture of shaping his hands into a six-inch rectangle to represent the hard drive that Don McDonald brought to the first gathering about computing. Seeing a hard drive was his "ah ha!" moment when he realized that he could relate to computers via their guts. He was fond of reliving that moment, and he always illustrated it with his hands in the air. The symbolic gesture told the tale. The Möbius band that Laslo Unterweg referred to repeatedly and made for me time after time likewise held some deep meaning for him. In the absence of other clues to its meaning, I accepted his explanation that it represented life in Flamingo Park, which he found to be one-sided and lacking in diversity. The scrabble board that Barbara Howard's daughter made for her was a totemic object depicting a family history. She permanently affixed the Scrabble tile-letters to spell out her mother's and family's traits, names and jokes. This is an example of an object that symbolized and encapsulated Barbara's love of words and ideas that were manifested in her love of a board game.

#### *4. Poetry: Reading It, Hearing It*

All poetry offers insights into the mind of its author, and autobiographical poems offer a particularly fine-grained way of discovering meaning. This poem by Barbara Howard was written when she was approximately age 90; it is a profound reflection of the life outlook that underlay all that she did, including her exploration of I-C technology. It is titled, "An Elderly Lady Looks Ahead."

Driving, I look ahead to sudden stops.  
Red lights, changes and new directions.  
Not my choice.  
I want to be ready.

In life, I look ahead to sudden stops,  
Temporary switches and changes—  
Not my choice.  
I want to be ready.

People also speak the poetry of their lives. Sometimes if we are careful listeners we can hear it immediately. But more often it does not emerge from the ‘background chatter’ until it is spoken/told time after time. Examples from the Park research participants were:

- Al S. patching together people across the seas.
- Neva E. taking deep breaths and lazing her way through the years.
- Laslo U. eating life with big bites; seeing his old age in a tiny corner of his mind.
- Samuel D. harmonizing and seeking good fellowship.
- Barbara H. Scrabble-ing her life together.

## **F. Products: The Fruits of the Labor**

### *1. Case Studies*

I did not envision the creation of case studies while conducting interviews and gathering other kinds of data for this research. However, the profiles of five individuals which are presented in Part II of this dissertation will inevitably be viewed as such. Given this fact, one might heed the words of Stake who believes that “case study method has been too little honored as the intrinsic study of a valued particular. . . .; generalization should not be emphasized in all research” (Stake 2000, 439). His further thoughts are instructive on the complexities involved in the use of case study as method and product.

Some call for letting the case ‘tell its own story.’ . . . We cannot be sure that a case, telling its own story, will tell all or tell well--- but the ethos of interpretive study, seeking out emic meanings held by the people within the case, is strong. . . . Even when empathic and respectful of each person’s realities, the researcher decides what the case’s *own story* is, or at least what will be included in the report. More will be pursued than was volunteered. Less will be reported than was learned. (Stake 2000, 441)

The purpose of a case report is not to represent the world, but to represent the case . . . The utility of case research to practitioners and policy makers is in its extension of experience. The methods of qualitative case study are largely the methods of disciplining personal and particularized experience. (448-9)

### *2. Ethnography*

Although this dissertation, as a portion of a comprehensive ethnographic study, cannot fulfill the promise of a full-blown ethnography, it is meant to serve in some measure to meet the ideal described by one anthropologist,



I treat ethnography itself as a performance emplotted by powerful stories. Embodied in written reports, these stories simultaneously describe real cultural events and make additional, moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements. Ethnographic writing is allegorical at the level both of its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied by its mode of textualization). (Clifford 1986, 98)

My rationale for the presentation of the profiles in Part II is as follows. Rather than ‘fracturing the data’ into themes supported by interview quotes, whereby the themes assume the role of major actors, I chose to keep the participants as the main players by touching on the emerging themes within each conversation. I have included many of the participants’ words in order to provide the context in which the salient ideas were embedded since this represents the process in which these ideas developed. My approach to authenticity, then, is to allow participants to speak as much as I do and to serve as guide as much as interpreter. Within these parameters I attempted to limit the interview transcripts by summarizing the excluded parts (as they occurred) but at least to indicate the choice of subjects and interests made *by* the speakers.

### *3. Longitudinal Study*

My research in Flamingo Park became a longitudinal study at first by accident and eventually by design. It is only with the passage of time that we can observe the trajectory of elders grappling with a challenge of the magnitude of I-C technologies. There are many fits and starts, success and failures that delay or hasten the course of learning, or that end in opting out of the attempt. It was with repeated interactions over time that I began to discern the reliance upon core survival strategies in the form, for example, of mantras to live by (happiness is gratitude; frustration begets aggression; illiterate ‘til death), techniques to soothe (Solitaire and the female form; the memories stored in photographs), aids for sensory loss (the interplay between vision and memory and how photographs, however dimly perceived, can refresh the remembered experience). Longitudinal studies contain the tension, however, of not knowing their ending point.

It is somewhat axiomatic among social science researchers that you know that your study is completed when you do not learn anything new, when the same information is repeated. While I heard fewer new ideas and thoughts in 2005 and fewer still in 2008, it was the repetition of certain old ones that provided insight. I had to hear Laslo U. talk again and again about frustration and lost time before I understood the intensity of his feelings in this regard. It took the constant reiteration by Neva E. of her laziness and her husband’s tech illiteracy for me to recognize it as a chant. It was only after I heard Al S. repeat his HAM experiences every time we

talked that I understood they were the high point of his life and that they constituted the origin of his computing *and* his connecting. The former was in service of the latter but it was the successful connection between sweethearts that instilled in him an affectionate appreciation of the utility of the computer-agent. Thus the cogent fact of longitudinal study is that research is never done. The rejuvenation of Al Swenson's computer interest between 2005 and 2008 and his eventual arrival on Facebook a month after our last interview are examples of the fact that discovery is endless. People's lives continue, circumstances change, new ideas form, outside forces such as family, cultural trends and media push them into action. When the survey researchers telephone, a given individual's response on Day X may be completely different on Day Y.

## **G. Authority, Responsibility, Evaluation & Knowing**

### *1. Evaluating Authority and Validity*

Although questions of validity and reliability are of lesser concern in the world of qualitative research where studies are unique and not designed for replication, a few scholars have tried their hands at operationalizing these concepts. In his essay on how to attain validity in qualitative research, Wolcott listed nine points including good listening, accurate recording, and full reporting; another one of his points resonated with me and my research approach. He called it, "Let readers 'see' for themselves."

I make a conscious effort to include primary data in my final accounts, not only to give readers an idea of what my data are like but to give access to the data themselves. In striking the delicate balance between providing too much detail and too little, I would rather err on the side of too much; conversely between overanalyzing and underanalyzing data, I would rather say too little. Accordingly, my accounts are often lengthy; informants are given a forum for presenting their own case to whatever extent possible and reasonable . . . [M]y growing bias toward letting informants speak for themselves is exactly that—a bias in favor of trying to capture the express thoughts of others rather than relying too singularly on what I have observed and interpreted. (Wolcott 1990, 130)

As researchers, we must bear responsibility for our actions, be they the manner in which we use our participants' words or be they the manner in which we use our observations.

If part of the ethnographic enterprise is to take people's own words away from them . . . then another part of the same enterprise must surely be to remain responsible for how those words may be interpreted by those who read them. . . .

Textual representations transform social actions and events into narrative, which in turn shape and give consequence to the details of observed life . . . By placing the observable into recognizable textual formats, the ethnographer can make the social world readable . . . [This] is part of a complex discourse of authorship, authority and responsibility. (Coffey 1996, 71, 72)

To serve as witness (rather than “voyeurs”) we have “to provide an empirically thick description of what happened: who did what, to whom, in what circumstances, with what responses from others, to what end, and with what consequences” (Bosk 1992, 4).

By what criteria do we wish our studies to be evaluated? Three that I would choose are among those listed by Richardson: (1) Contribution. Does the work “contribute to our understanding of social-life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective?” (2) Reflexivity. “How did the author come to write this text? . . . How has the author’s subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Do authors hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people they have studied?” and (3) Expresses a reality. “Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience? Does it seem ‘true’—a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’?” (Richardson et al. 2000, 254).

## 2. *The Elusiveness of Knowing*

The purpose of research is to contribute to human knowledge and understanding. In the context of social science study, many scholars believe that a preliminary step for this contribution is self-knowledge and awareness, as well as an accounting of one’s subjectivity. Fifteen years ago a scholar conceptualized “a participatory mode of consciousness” in her attempt to expand the understanding of the idea of subjectivity and knowing in qualitative research. She observed that the “anxiety about how to be as objective as possible has been translated into anxiety about how to manage subjectivity as rigorously as possible” (Heshusius 1994, 15). She posited,

two kinds of subjectivity; the accounted for and the not accounted for; the tamed and the untamed. . . . How would we know if the unaccounted-for subjectivity is not far more important in determining one’s influence on the research process than the accounted for? . . . The preoccupation for how to account for one’s subjectivity can be seen as a subtle version of empiricist thought, in that it portrays the belief that one knows ‘how to handle things,’ that one knows what is ‘behind’ things and ‘behind’ oneself and how to keep it under control. (p. 16)

Heshusius recommended a re-viewing of the ancient idea of participation as knowing in the deeply somatic sense of our forebears. This kind of knowing involves a “deep passion and identification . . . that *does not want* anything,” and a compassionate consciousness (17; italics in the original). She continued,

[T]he essence and starting point of the act of coming to know is not a subjectivity that one can explicitly account for, but is of a direct participatory nature one cannot account for . . . [There is a] . . . pervasive

affirmative quality, which can exist only when there is a recognition of the deeper kinship between ourselves and other, [which] is the ground from which participatory knowing emerges. A participatory mode of consciousness. . . results from the ability to temporarily let go of all preoccupation with self and move into a state of complete attention. . . . Concerns about truth and degrees of interpretation are replaced by positing a transformative process of merging, and then differentiation, which results in rethinking the boundaries of self and other in the knowledge of their permeability. (17-18)

The solution for not becoming “‘lost’ in some symbiotic participation” which would obviate “reasoning conceptualization, [and] categorization,” is to develop “the ability to self forget and fully attend” simultaneously (20).

During the research in Flamingo Park I have entered a mode of “participatory consciousness” and hope to give evidence of it in this dissertation.

## **H. Names, Terminology, Formatting & Figures**

### *1. Word Choices*

Every word associated with our older citizenry is heavily freighted with (often negative) meanings, which reveal our deep and abiding ambivalence about the process of aging. From the many possibilities, I could find no perfect choice of noun or adjective from the commonly used: Seniors, Senior Citizens, elders, elderly, old, older, oldest, aged, aging, and mature. Nor could my Park acquaintances suggest a best word with which to refer to themselves or others in their age cohort. Only one resident, Laslo U., suggested the use of neutral words like septuagenarian, octogenarian, nonagenarian and centenarian, which was, in fact the recommendation (twenty years earlier) of an expert in the field of gerontology (Katzowitz 1989, 5). But since these words are not in common parlance, I elected to simply use throughout my discussions the ones that are, at present. I have sometimes devised constructions that parallel other age designations. Thus, ‘elderhood’ and ‘seniorhood’ from ‘childhood’ or ‘adulthood;’ ‘oldster’ from ‘youngster;’ ‘Junior Citizens’ from ‘Senior Citizens’ (actually used by at least one Park resident) and so on. It was with some difficulty that I chose “older adult” to designate the members of this research population in the title of this dissertation. I had hoped for a more poetic turn of phrase but, in the end, opted for what seemed most neutral in meaning.

Throughout this dissertation the word “memory” is used a great deal, both by me and by the research participants. I am mindful of the fact that my undefined use of the word may perturb experts in the field of psychology and neurology who are identifying new concepts and kinds of memory: long term, working, discourse, meta, remote/autobiographical, explicit/implicit,

episodic, spatial, and prospective are examples (Neisser and Hyman 2000; Cohen 1996; Cavanaugh and Blanchard-Fields 2002). There are other words that could prove problematic for various readers. Language usage constantly changes and words are co-opted, borrowed, redefined and coined at a mind-boggling pace. Each reader will bring a different lens through which to perceive meanings. A good example of co-opted meaning is the word ‘virtual,’ which once meant ‘nearly’ and now popularly means something like ‘existing in the digital world of I-C technology.’ ‘Technology’—a word that appears often in this dissertation—is so polysemic as to defy easy definition. Rather than try to pin it down, I use it in the manner of the popular and academic literature of the times—as a device or means used to accomplish certain ends like, in this case, obtaining information and communicating. In the nature of a caveat, I would say that the use in this dissertation of terms related to I-C technology may lack the precision favored by experts in the field, but it is not within the scope of the study to research their various meanings. Indeed, I was introduced to many I-C technology phenomena by the participants in my research and together we were engaging in a process of mutual learning, defining and exploring.

## *2. Terms of Address*

Whether I refer to individuals by their first or last names (all of which are pseudonyms) and with or without their professional titles depended on the nature of our relationship, how they self-identified, how they were identified by others and what I sensed about their cultural backgrounds. For example, when I first met Samuel Dunlop he was still enacting his role as minister and that’s how I had heard of him, so I called him “Reverend.” As the years went by and he retired, I referred to him in my notes by his first name (as did everyone else) but often addressed him as “Rev. Dunlop,” in person. Although I always addressed Dr. Querengasser with his title and last name, I shortened his name to “Dr. Q” in my reports and discussions.

## *3. Abbreviations*

In many writings on the subject, “information and communication technology” is shortened to “ICT.” Out of deference to members of my research population who complained about the use of too much ‘alphabetese’ in the media, I decided to eliminate the third letter in this common abbreviation. Keeping the last word provides a clue to the first two letters and is thus less taxing on fragile memories; it reads better to my eye as well. Also, there were occasions when I wanted to modify the word technology, making it either singular or plural or something else. Thus, *I-C* stands for Information-Communication/s; *A.L.* stands for Assisted Living; *NCC*

stands for Nursing Care Center; *CC* stands for Computer Club, *CCRC* stands for continuing care retirement community and *SLIN* (my pseudonymous renaming) is an acronym for Sunlanda Library Information Network.

#### *4. Formatting*

Brackets surround various words in transcripts for several reasons: (1) to replace missing words in order to clarify meaning in transcription quotes; (2) to provide an aside which functions as a brief commentary; (3) to indicate the mood of an interviewee—laughing or chuckling, for example; (4) to define or explain an obscure concept; and (5) to indicate a substitution for names or other identifying words, in order to preserve confidentiality (already identified pseudonymous substitutions are not so designated).

#### *5. A List of Flamingo Park Residents in this Study*

These are the early computer club members and interviewees.

*Barbara Howard*, primary contact  
*Donald McDonald*, founder of the Computer Club  
(Rev.) *Samuel Dunlop* (Myra, his wife; Sam Jr. and Ann, his children)  
*Helmut Rossler*  
*Marion Probst*, 1st Mac user

These are the later club members and interviewees.

*Albert Swenson* (Dottie, his wife); eventual C.C. co-director  
*Neva Evans* (Peter, her husband, and later, Tally, her ‘companion’)  
*Will & Winnie Mahler*  
*Laslo Unterweg* (Leon, his son), and Mary Jo, his secretary  
*Myrtle Likert*  
*Nelson and Sue Jones*  
*Mary and Mervin Cooper*  
*Dr. Richard Querengasser* (“Dr. Q”)  
*Carmen Nouvel*  
*James Teller*  
*Elizabeth Dickerson* (and Spencer, her ‘companion’)  
*Anita and Stanley Norman*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Mac owners  
*Sturgis Johnson*, resident and Barbara Howard’s computer ‘tutor’ friend  
*George Brinkley*, resident and co-director of C. Club, as of 2004

Listed below are the other individuals that are mentioned.

*Cody Peabody*, paid computer tutor and instructor from outside the Park  
*Dora*, Park staff “secretary” of Assisted Living  
*Margaritte*, resident of A.L.  
*Sarah*, an aide in A.L.

## *6. Figures*

The accumulated interviews conducted with Park residents from 1996 through 2008 are presented in Figure 1. A comparison of computer use among household members is presented in Figure 2.

Oct. '96	May '99	Aug. 2000	March '01	Feb. '02	Jan. '03	July '03	Nov. '05	Sept. '08
Barbara H.	Barbara## ↑	(Barbara) ↑	(Barbara)	Barbara →	Barbara →	(Barbara)	Barbara^^ →	Barbara^^ →
Don M.	(Don)	Don →	(Don)	Don →	Don →	(Don) →	((Don)) →	[wf.ill]
Samuel D.	[ sick]^	Samuel ↑	[busy]	(Sam) →	-----	(Sam) →	Sam^^ →	Sam^^ ↓
Helmut R.	(Helmut)##^^ ↓	Helmut^^ ↓	(Helmut)	**	-----	-----	-----	-----
Marion P.	Marion## ↓ ↑	[away]	Marion →	Marion →	Marion →	(Marion)^	[away]	[away]
(Al S.)	Al S.	(Al) →	[busy]	Al →	(Al) →	-----	Al →	Al^^ → **
	Laslo U.	Laslo ↑	Laslo →	Laslo →	Laslo	Laslo →	Laslo^^ →	Laslo^^ ↓
	Dr. Q	Dr. Q^^ →	Dr. Q^^ →	D. Q^^ →	Dr. Q^^ →	Dr. Q^^	Dr. Q^^ ↓	**
	Neva E. ##	(Neva) ↑	Neva	Neva →	Neva →	Neva →	Neva →	((Neva)) →
	Carmen N.	[sick]^	[sick]	[sick]	**	-----	-----	-----
	Will M.	-----	Will →	Will&W →	-----	-----	W&W →	W&W ↓
	Ralph T.	####	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----
	Mervin C.	-----	Mervin	-----	-----	[no response]	**	-----
	Mary C.	-----	Mary	-----	-----	[no response]	Mary C. ↑	[no response]
		Nelson J.	Nelson →	[no time]	[no time]	-----	(Nelson) →	-----
	Sue J.	Sue J.	Sue →	[no time]	[no time]	-----	-----	-----
		Myrtle L.	Myrtle L.	Myrtle →	-----	-----	Myrtle →	Myrtle ↓
		Eliz. D.	Eliz. D.	Eliz. D. →	-----	-----	Eliz. D. →	[sick]##
						Anita N.	[no response]	(Anita)^ ↓
						Stan N.	[no response]	**
						-----	George B.	George →

\*\* Death of interviewee since previous contact  
 ## Death of spouse of interviewee since previous contact  
 ^^ Health of interviewee notably worse since previous contact  
 → Direction of progress in computer use since previous contact  
 ( ) Contact without formal interview  
 (( )) Interview by telephone  
 ----- No effort to contact due to lack of time (or due to knowledge of disinclination (in one case) to participate  
 [ ] Lack of contact for stated reason

Fig. 1. Schedule of interviews in Flamingo Park.



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Wife-Using Couples

\*Barbara Howard (&)  
\*Neva Evans ((&))  
\*Marion Probst  
\*Elizabeth Dickerson

Husband-using couples

\* Albert Swenson ###  
\*\*Don McDonald  
\*Helmut Rossler ### (&&)  
Dr. Querengasser ### (&)  
\*Samuel Dunlop (&)  
Will Mahler ((&))  
*Ralph Teller* ###

Both-Using Couples (first named predominate user)

Nelson and Sue Jones  
Mary and \*Mervin Cooper  
*Stanley## and Anita Norman &&*  
George Brinkley (and his partner)

Single Individuals (widowed, divorced, never married)

Myrtle Likert  
Laslo Unterweg ((&))  
*Carmen Nouvel* ###

- 
- |       |  |
|-------|--|
| *     | spouses ill/in decline at time of meeting; subsequently died                                     |
| **    | spouses ill/in decline and still alive   |
| ##    | now deceased, spouse alive but ill   |
| ###   | now deceased, as well as spouse  |
|       |  |
| &     | one move to new location (from Independent Living to Assisted Living or HC)                      |
| &&    | two moves: to AL and then to Health Center   |
| ((&)) | move not due to illness but to upgrade residence or because original residence needed renovating |

Italicized names: one interview only

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Fig. 2. Comparison of computer use in household *and* change of household location *and* change in health condition of interviewees from 1996–2008.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **FLAMINGO PARK, I-C TECHNOLOGIES, AND THE COMPUTER CLUB**

#### **A. Flamingo Park as Space and Community**

Flamingo Park is a retirement community of about one thousand individuals, located in a city I call “Dry Springs” which is in a southerly state I call “Sunlanda.” It was established in the late 1960s as a continuing care retirement community (CCRC). Admission fees and living costs for the Park are moderately high and its residents come from a middle class lifestyle. Flamingo Park, comprising more than fifty acres, is beautifully landscaped, with a park of exotic flowering trees and a large pond at its center. On the whole, it is a nicely appointed and maintained living environment. It is a secured area surrounded by a high chain link fence and entered through either of two guarded gates at which one has to stop and announce one’s business; security staff patrol day and night in small carts. The Park area is adjacent to and surrounded by busy roads and highways, strip malls, individual businesses, and residential streets. Notwithstanding such traffic, the Park has its fair share of wild life, ranging from waterfowl to small foxes.

Within Flamingo Park, there were—during the twelve years of this study—several kinds of housing options: conjoined cottage complexes and apartments in four separate buildings, three of which were high rises. The newest one was completed in 2004. Within these options, residents might live alone, with one or two roommates, or as married couples. There were three stages of lifestyles: independent, assisted and total nursing care. Accommodations for the latter two stages were the Assisted Living (A.L.) building and the Nursing Care Center (NCC), which could be a temporary recovery (from surgery or severe illness) area or a last stage in one’s life. Apart from financial considerations, the major criterion for admission to the Park, in the 1990s, was that one had to be ambulatory at the moment of arrival. More recently, a second criterion concerning mental soundness was instituted. In the mid-1990s, prospective residents could, by paying a sum of earnest money, be put on a waiting list for a vacant place. Once on the list, they were welcome to engage in Park activities. In the late-2000s, due to a nation-wide economic decline, the supply of housing units exceeded the demand and discounted fees were being offered.

Flamingo Park, on any given day, was typically a beehive of activity. There was an auditorium-like space—the Assembly Building—in which residents gathered for a variety of activities including worship services (mostly Christian but rabbis sometimes visited for services),

concerts, rallies, dances, cocktail hours, seasonal holiday parties, communal birthdays, and 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary celebrations and voting (it was an official polling place). Similar social events were also held in the recreation rooms of individual apartment buildings. There were outdoor Park-wide events, as well. The best example was its version of the Senior Olympics (later renamed, Senior Contest), in which resident athletes competed in running, walking, swimming, biking, golfing and the like. On such occasions, cheering onlookers sat along the Park streets and watched the progress of the participants. There were other parade-like events which traversed the entire Park, especially at holiday times. Nearby school children occasionally came and paraded through the Park in their Halloween costumes and residents could make floats for a Christmas parade. These Park activities, events and meetings were planned and conducted by the residents of Flamingo Park, in coordination with “social activities” staff and following, no doubt, certain Park guidelines. As in other American communities, residents engaged in a variety of volunteer activities which added to the richness of Park existence and which even contributed to the administration of Park life. Volunteer activities spanned a wide range of possibilities—the committee for church service flowers, staffing reception desks and the gift shop, assisting residents in the NCC during their leisure activities such as Bingo and holiday parties, reading the newspaper to residents with impaired vision, and so on. In addition to Park-wide activities, the Assisted Living and Nursing Care Center residences had their own activity directors, planned recreation events, and outings. Their activities included: seated calisthenics, movies, groups for oral newspaper reading and Bible Study; imported entertainment like pianists, singers, and animal trick acts; and for A.L. residents, dining out and shopping. These activities were, of course, open to any Park resident who cared to join them.

One salient feature of the Park social landscape was its workforce. Whereas residents were nearly all Caucasian in the Anglo-European sense; much of the work force was not. This was as true in 2008 as it was in 1996. Nearly all employees in the ‘unskilled’ jobs of maintenance, grounds keeping, custodial care, food service, cosmetic and hair care, health service aides and assistants were native-born African Americans or Caribbean-born Blacks. In the Park health service, there were professionals and semi-skilled employees (nurses and assistants) from Hispanic and Southeast Asian backgrounds such as the Philippines. There was a considerable amount of close physical contact between these employees and the residents, ranging from daily chauffeuring to intimate tasks such as home bathing of the more frail

residents. Thus, the welfare and daily subsistence of a middle social class of residents was very directly and apparently dependent upon the work and service of a lower social class of multi-ethnic workers. Apparently, most residents were comfortable with this social configuration since it mirrored the larger social order in which this age cohort was raised. While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to comment further on this social dynamic, there is a worthy description of the lives of such caretakers by an author who worked as one; see Diamond (1992).

As a community, Flamingo Park was a hybrid. On the one hand, it exhibited the features, described by Schuler (1996), of the “old model” of a traditional community. It was homogeneous, exclusive, socially isolated, and, to some extent, inflexible; members lived together, were in many ways “like-minded,” and evidenced a sense of loyalty and belonging to the Park. On the other hand, the Park was a new model of American community—an artificially created one centered on the concept of age and run by a non-elected governing body—a corporation. The members of Flamingo Park deliberately chose to live with only a selected portion of the larger society, and to wall themselves off from the rest in order to eliminate many of the problems facing ordinary communities, such as, supporting employment opportunities, financing education of youth, negotiating class and economic differences, dealing with social misfits and crime. Residents had totally committed themselves to this community; having bought into it for life, they planned to die there. This is not to say that they were captives in an institutional setting; some of them still resided in their northern residences for up to half of the year. In contrast, others of them could and did choose to rarely leave the Park and to have most of their needs satisfied within its fenced perimeter. For this latter segment, the Park was a total community. In its level of affluence and education and by virtue of its isolation (if not geographically, then socially), the Park appeared to be comparable to the community of Telluride, Colorado, as Schuler depicted it. As such, would the Park be a fertile ground for the development of an “InfoZone,” a locus for an electronic community network system? Or would it be more realistic to suppose that this retirement community was filled with electronic non-participants—the “elderly and retired people” who are “not as likely to be Community Network Participants” as those between the ages of 20 and 50? (Schuler 1996, 273-4). In 1996, I thought that the Park had such a potential; some of its members were evidencing interest in I-C technologies by forming a club for fellow or potential computer owners. However, twelve years later in 2009, the Park, though not filled with electronic non-participants, was still light years

away from being an Info-Zone. By 2009, it was even more the case that ongoing changes in I-C technologies had resulted in “stratified . . . ‘generations’ of technology . . .” and that within the Park “people living physically side by side live[d] within different ages of cyberspace” (Bruce 1995, 3).

## **B. Flamingo Park and Information Resources**

### *1. The Impact of the Societal Climate on Residents’ Use of I-C Technologies*

The American cultural climate, especially that aired in national print and broadcast media, has not always been kind in its treatment of older adults. Flamingo Park residents do not live in a news media vacuum; most of them (by all accounts) are avid television watchers and thus they are exposed to the plethora of media images that depict older citizens as less than fully competent human beings. At the mid-point of my study, in about 2003-4, two popular television commercials commanded my attention. One of them promoted the flavor of a beverage. Its long-lasting flavor was measured in the interminable amount of time it took “grandma” to walk from a house to a waiting car at the end of a walkway. Her gait was so slow she appeared to be “moonwalking” in place. Down by the car, young folk were waiting for her while drinking the beverage. They said something like, “It’s OK, Grandma, take your time.” This ad found humor in the popular conception of the elderly as slow, as the antithesis of the hip, fast, in-charge youth who will be driving Grandma somewhere if she ever makes it to the car. A second commercial promoted the low cost of distance calling with a certain cell phone company. The idea was that the cost was so low people would be tempted to call others to the point of annoyance. Their slogan was: “Can you ever call *too* much?” To depict this idea, Senior citizens in a retirement community were shown, evading the annoying phone calls of their junior relatives while they strolled through gardens, played cards and ball games with each other. Except for the (rejected) landline telephone, there was nary a telecommunications device in sight. Thus, in these two instances, mass media depicted elderly citizens as frail (= generally incompetent?) and/or low-tech folk. If use of sophisticated technologies is not modeled in the mass media, how much more difficult it becomes to imagine it for oneself.

Yet, even while being exposed to these unflattering or ambiguous images of themselves—referred to as “geezer teasers” in the advertising world (Patterson, 1989)—older citizens were, in the mid-90s, being inundated with references to the new world of information

technologies. Increasing numbers of radio and TV news and entertainment programs referred listeners/watchers to web sites that promised to amplify or supplement their information. Half a dozen years ago, this was especially pronounced in the public broadcast media, NPR and PBS. Now it is wide spread on commercial channels, as well. Indeed, several residents of Flamingo Park mentioned to me that this was a primary reason for their interest in exploring computers, “You hear WWW all the time. What is it?” Print media too began nudging their readers over to the livelier image-rich technology of the Internet. By 2009, such nudgings were omnipresent in a publications devoted to older adults. In the 2009 issues of the AARP magazine there were, on the pages of featured articles, large yellow circles into which black arrows pointed. Black text in the circle stated, for example, “More online. Learn how to [do X] at [aarpmagazine.org/lifestyle](http://aarpmagazine.org/lifestyle).” Thus, this Senior citizen-focused publication illustrated its expectation that its readers—older Americans—are, of course, net savvy. Most recently, older Americans are being advised that they should ‘get with the program’ and join Facebook or similar networking sites. A *New York Times* article featured a 73 year-old woman who was saved from a life of boredom by joining such a site and now spends fourteen hours a day on it (Clifford 2009, D5). A magazine article featured a self-confessed, 59-year old Facebook addict, and a sidebar in the article described five networking sites, including one sponsored by the magazine (Delehanty 2009). These are all examples of a kind of technological pushing towards new behaviors (Bruce 1998).

However, the message from cultural media is ambiguous. Many of the derisive references to older adults as the “Generation Ex-Lax” (Khoo 1999) or as “geezers” are buried in industry journals; others are in plain sight. In a 2009 online Pew report (Horrigan op. cit.), the word “geezer” (a disparaging term in any dictionary definition) was used to describe older citizens, and readers learned in an AARP publication that there is now a new fiction genre dubbed “geezer lit” (Remnick 2008, 6). Older Americans are still fair game for jokes at their expense which continue to add fodder to the stereotyped notions of aging. A laboratory study of the impact of stereotypes on memory in older adults demonstrated that,

Older individuals’ memory capabilities can be damaged by self-stereotypes that are derived from a prevalent and insidious stereotype about aging. Specifically, the stereotype that memory decline is inevitable can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. (Levy 1996, 1106)

Each ‘generation’ of computing applications inspires popular news stories featuring older adult novice users. Some of those I have collected reveal the trend. In 2002, the ‘problem’ was getting Mom onto the Internet (*The Onion* 2002); in 2008, it was getting Mom onto Facebook

(Scott 2008); in 2009, it's "Helping Grandpa Get His Tech On" (Taub 2009). Embedded in these features is the idea that members of older generations—identified most conveniently by their reproductive roles of parent and grandparent—are objects of astonishment and wonder in their encounters with the latest technologies. And underlying this notion is that of a supposed incompetence by the elders. To what extent these various ideas figure into the thinking of the two-thirds of the Park residents who do not use I-C technologies is a matter for further study.

## *2. 'High Tech' Information Resources*

On a community-wide basis, Flamingo Park had no high tech infrastructure or equipment for residential use when my study began in 1996. Those few individuals who owned computers provided their own dial-up online connections with varying degrees of success. Despite the fact that over one hundred residents attended a meeting on the subject of computing technology, the Park administration did next to nothing to provide resources for such technology other than to allow an incipient computer club the use of a small room for meetings and a year following that to donate an old computer. When, in 2002-04, a new high rise was being constructed, administrators had to be persuaded by a few knowledgeable residents to install T-1 lines.

Meanwhile, in other parts of the country, there were more forward thinkers on the issue of I-C technologies by older adults. As early as 1986, an organization called SeniorNet was proactively offering to set up learning centers in, among other places, retirement communities, for the purpose of teaching older adults the use of computing technology. At the starting point of my study in the mid-1990s, the issue of computer use and availability was under consideration for retirement communities, according to reports in various industry journals. Such reports and articles in the gerontological literature that were aimed at (often, reluctant) administrators and staff suggested that computers could serve as low cost intervention devices to promote social contact, cognitive stimulation, self esteem and dexterity exercises (Anderson 2000; Daniel 1998; Hendrix and Sakauye 2001). Other articles offered advice on how to teach and encourage computer use among elderly residents recommending: short and slow paced learning sessions; eliminating background chatter; one-to-one teaching in a low, clear voice and friendly interfaces. (Hendrix and Sakauye 2001; White 1999). During this time period of the late 1990s, the prevalent reason offered for computer use was communication with family members, especially grandchildren with whom elders wanted to have common interests. "It taught me how to play

with my grandchildren when I visit them. They're amazed that grandma knows how to operate the computer!" (Daniel 1998, 89).

Some senior residents of a retirement complex in Boston had ambitious plans for computing. Thanks to MIT help with the website development, "the residents are learning interviewing techniques, so that they can get some of their fellow residents' personal histories online" (Zinnim 2000, 36). This report also featured a 78 year old Floridian, who became inspired by his own computer exploration to set up computing resources in eleven nursing homes in northern Florida. He described the resistance he found among residential administrators (no budget, space, or personnel for a computer program) and how to overcome it. He urged readers to "adopt a nursing home" to aid in this endeavor, and he started a website for these homes called "Elders Communicating" (Zinnim 2000). The effort to bring computing technology and its applications into retirement communities seems to be continuing here and there in various parts of the country though to what extent the administrators of these facilities are at the vanguard of this endeavor is not clear. A recent newspaper article reported that a *relative* of retirement home residents felt the need to create a "social network" (MyWay Village, begun in 2006), which he is now selling to nursing homes in several states (Clifford 2009).

What are some possible reasons that Flamingo Park, in this same time period—of the late 1980s, 1990s or even the 2000s—did relatively little to bring the latest I-C technology to its residents? Perhaps it is an example of "critical mass" theory, one axiom of which states that "the higher the skill and effort requirements of an interactive medium, the lower the likelihood that universal access will be achieved" (Markus 1987, 205). It is easier, in other words, for a (retirement) community of 300 residents to grow a population of early adaptors of technology into a majority of adaptors, than one of 1000. And those early adaptors who were on the societal fringes of this technology use and development (in this case, older citizens) had difficulty in finding reciprocal partners which, initially for Senior users, were typically a few younger family members. Thus, their use languished and some individuals (like Park residents, Myrtle Likert and Laslo Unterweg) were unable to sustain the required "communication discipline" (204). By 2008, the Park had donated to the Computer Club a room with a wireless Internet connection and one or two pieces of projection equipment. It was still left to the interested residents to raise money for other hardware. There seemed to be no plans to create a public computing center where the two thirds of the residents who were not computer users would have been able to



explore the technology. I-C technology in the Flamingo Park community, at large, remained at a low level.

### 3. 'Lower' Tech Information Resources

A pre-digital concept of proactively getting pertinent information resources into the hands of the elderly was envisioned in the mid-1980s by a London "information officer." She recommended carrying information to older adults either in their places of congregation (libraries, post offices, etc.) or into their homes as the information equivalent of meals-on-wheels (Todd 1984). Flamingo Park did this as recently as 2008 in a number of ways, ranging from print media to closed circuit TV broadcasts, and the means of delivery remained unchanged from 1996. There was a *Weekly Flyer* (reduced, during these years, from a four-to-six page bulletin to a two-to-four page one, a page of which by 2008 was devoted to remarks from the in-house pastor) that was carried to the door of each resident. One primary feature was the week's meal menu; these meals could be eaten in the central Main Dining Room or the in the dining facilities of Assisted Living and the Nursing Care Center. Upcoming events, both inside and outside the Park, were listed and news of residents was given, including new residents, changed residences, illnesses, hospitalizations and deaths. There might be brief articles from Park Management regarding future plans for new facilities, such as increased exercise and work-out equipment and space. This bulletin was put together and physically distributed by residents; paper and printing were provided by the Park administration. Its contents were probably monitored and/or suggested by Park management. In addition to this printed, park-wide *Weekly*, there was a weekly bulletin for Assisted Living with similar information. There were small bulletin boards next to the apartment building mailboxes on which announcements pertaining to activities within each building and news about building residents were posted. Another communal news source was provided on TV monitors placed in the lobbies of each apartment building. A closed circuit channel ran a loop of silent texts covering similar but updated information on, for example, recent resident hospitalizations. Since each individual residence was supplied with a cable connection for television reception, this same information could be obtained at home through the closed circuit Park channel.

### 4. Park and Town Library Resources

For mature adults, one might well expect that libraries would be regarded as good, tried and true places in which to inform oneself. Every Park building complex had a space reserved

for a collection of books, many of which were in the “large print” category. The most ambitious of these “libraries” (which grew in size and scope during the years of my study), was run by the very capable (and renown) “Rob” (short for Florence Robinson), a tiny woman well past 100 years of age. When, during my interview with her, I mentioned any use she might have for “technology,” she led me to her card catalog drawer and told me very firmly that it was her technology of choice. There certainly were no computers available as a means of locating or obtaining books. Park residents whom I met made frequent references to their use of these in-house book collections. However, when I enquired about their use of the local town libraries, the majority stated their reluctance to visit them. There were several reasons (the inconvenience of having to drive, uncomfortable weather conditions, etc.) but the most oft cited was their lack of knowledge when confronted with the computers that had replaced the card catalogs. For instance, Computer Club member Carmen Nouvel said she was fascinated by libraries and had loved visiting the Library of Congress when she lived in Washington D.C. Books were her “life,” Carmen told me, and suggested that somebody should write a book on how to use computerized libraries. She felt intimidated by libraries without card catalogs and didn’t know how to check on whether a book was available or not. “The library doesn’t seem to be here for me . . . there seems to be like a wall there that I haven’t gone past,” she lamented. There were a few book-loving Park residents like Barbara Howard and Al Swenson who were computer savvy enough to use the Sunlanda Library Information Network (SLIN) from their home computers. Another few residents tried to understand that system by attending training sessions at a nearby town library but did not succeed in understanding its use or the library computers.

Why were libraries no longer the friendly havens of yore? What are some of the other challenges that confront Seniors there? The idea that libraries needed to be mindful of older users has been written about for at least three decades (Bichteler 1987; Nauratil 1988). In the 1980s when library systems were being automated and computers began to appear in book circulation areas, patron anxiety and avoidance were noted. This library-centered “technostress” was described by one librarian.

Some users are afraid of the hardware . . . ‘terrified of touching the terminal for fear of damaging it, wiping out a file or embarrassing themselves by making mistakes.’ New users dislike a situation where the terminal is in a public area so that other people have the opportunity to look over their shoulders and observe their errors. The generalization that older people have more problems with terminal paralysis than younger people usually holds true. . . . Frustration levels are lower when someone is there to straighten out a problem. (Bichteler 1987, 285)

According to library publications on the subject, the solution of more end-user education recommended by Bichteler in 1987 has been only sporadically attempted during the past two decades (one librarian reported on a “wildly popular” training program for seniors at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Burwell 2001), as interest in and financial resources for the training of patrons waxed and waned during this time. My examination in 2004 and 2009 of the three excellent libraries (two public and one university) in my Illinois community revealed that most of the special equipment, resources and training geared towards Senior users was discontinued due to their “lack of demand.” The ‘build it and they will come’ argument did not prove reliable for this part of the population whose diffidence (and the reasons for it) may be little understood by Junior citizens. In fact, the special equipment provided for Seniors and those with various disabilities mainly addressed mobility issues (wheel chair access) and did not include more sophisticated kinds of equipment like adaptive pointers, oversized keyboards, and head mouses for those with fine-motor control problems or other devices for the visually or hearing impaired (Weiss 1999). For example, Tun (1998) discovered that background noise can interfere with hearing comprehension by older adults, and Kemper described how older adults with compromised cognitive abilities had difficulty comprehending “prepositionally dense sentences” and “complex syntactic constructions” (Kemper 2001, 42). These are but two important factors to be considered when planning for Senior-friendly spaces and instructional materials in public. As to computer content, researchers have reported on the qualities of good interface design for older users (Laux 2001; Spiegle and Moulton 2001). My research on websites designed especially for Seniors revealed that even some of the prominent ones violated guidelines regarding visual busyness, color choices, horizontal (and vertical) scrolling length and so on. In fact, with the recent incorporation of videos such as YouTube selections on sites like SeniorNet, the violation of the original guidelines for interface design for older adults is noteworthy.

##### *5. Social Venues for Information Sharing in the Park*

In this relatively high-density community, there were many spaces and opportunities for socializing, grapevining, and staying active. Each of the apartment buildings had a spacious and pleasant lobby in which residents could and did gather. Such lobbies contained fine furnishings, which included upholstered chairs and couches, grand pianos, potted plants, artwork (some done by residents), and recent magazines. They also had small libraries, mail box areas, and reception desks where a combination of paid and volunteer staff noted who came and went, fielded

inquiries, accepted special mail deliveries and contacted residents when needed. Building residents sat in the lobbies or on the outside patios while waiting for Park transportation (golf carts, vans or busses) to various locations in and beyond the Park. These waiting times provided opportunities for conversation. Such acquaintance venues were especially popular for the newest residents who could simultaneously obtain concrete subsistence facts and interact with other residents. Additionally, each of the apartment buildings had a recreational or game room in which residents occasionally gathered to play cards or billiards; some had a smattering of exercise equipment—mainly stationary bicycles—which were occasionally used. These recreational areas with adjacent kitchens, were also used for private and public parties, celebrations, wine tasting events, and cocktail hours.

There were also central gathering places for the Park as a whole, the most frequented of which was the Main Dining Hall. While residents at the independent living level had their own cooking facilities, many contracted to eat several meals a week in the Dining Room. With a hostess who directed each diner to a specific table, the Hall was a pleasant blend of cafeteria-style food service and restaurant-like table settings with servers bringing beverages, desserts and special food requests. Each meal service spanned several hours to accommodate large numbers of Park residents. During meals, and while strolling across the Park, to and from the Dining Hall, residents chatted and caught up on residential news. Another main hub of activity was the Assembly Building with a main hall surrounded by small and mid-sized rooms. Myriad events and activities took place in those spaces, from the ceremonial to the mundane—seasonal holiday parties, memorial services, weekly cocktail gatherings, monthly communal birthday parties and yearly communal celebrations of 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversaries; all residents were invited. In the smaller meeting rooms of the Assembly Building, there were daily activities of clubs, associations, and groups of people coming together to share a task or plan an event.

#### *6. I-C Technologies in Personal Dwellings*

Flamingo Park residents and other retirees are typically forced to downsize their concepts of personal space when they move to retirement communities with reduced square footages. Some of the apartments and cottages I visited in the Park were packed with furnishings of former lives. Individuals from household traditions favoring large-sized furniture—such as the Rosslers, German émigrés, and Carmen Nouvel, a Latin American émigré—were particularly overwhelmed by massive pieces of furniture from which they were not able to part. Where then

did the large 1990s computing hardware fit into such households? Several residents I knew complained about this problem and one, Neva Evans, commented on the “ugly” appearance of desktop PCs. One researcher investigating this issue at a time coincident with the beginning of my study surmised that computers might not be welcome in households if they are not viewed as essential to running that household and if they are not linked to already existing domestic technologies (Venkatesh 1996). He pointed out that they do not occupy well-defined physical spaces (for potential users, for example) and considered whether information technologies already introduced into the household, such as cell phones, and answering and fax machines, might lead to further technology use such as PCs. With the goal of understanding “the role technology plays in family life” Venkatesh conceptualized two spaces or environments that must be examined—the social and technological, and the interaction between them. He underscored the need to identify technological diffusion agents within the home setting (Venkatesh 1996, 4).

Using a household economy perspective, researchers examined the “ways in which information systems and technologies intervene in a social group” such as a household organization (Davenport, Higgins and Somerville 2000, 902). De-emphasizing device content, they theorized that “information and media systems are a means by which households orient and adjust themselves . . . internally and externally.” Their consideration of the use of space to convey meaning was of particular relevance for my research. “The placing of devices in public or private spaces is indicative of judgments on their social role” (905). In the lives of the Flamingo Park residents with whom I spoke, the location of computers within residential spaces was a critical issue and one through which many relationships were negotiated. The meaning and value of their technological equipment could also be gleaned by observing their spatial allocation. Two researchers pointed to the need for ethnographic inquiry to investigate “the potential role of technologies within the milieu of domestic activities.”

The development of sophisticated computing for the home will be required to build upon existing social-and-technical-infrastructures which are as yet poorly understood . . . [but] might be explicated by attending to the patterns of action and mutually elaborative technology uses that occur in the particular places that make up the home. (Crabtree and Rodden 2002, 1-2)

Merkel (2002) examined “technology in use” in several households in her study of local and hidden literacies. Like these other “home studies,” her aim was to situate technology and examine “vernacular” literacy practices. These four research studies have varying degrees of penetration into home settings, ranging from videoed observing to brief interactions or

observations while conducting several interviews. Home-based research over a prolonged period of time is relatively infrequent. The kind of research reported in this dissertation, which examines the use of information technologies in the daily lives of older adults over many years, is rarer still.

The issue of a downsized living space becomes even more critical when individuals must relocate to the one-room accommodations of Assisted Living or nursing care facilities. The transportation of major technological hardware to such spaces is impractical, rarely done and a measure of the value of this equipment for the owner. I witnessed this very act on the part of four people in Flamingo Park, one of whom took four to five pieces of computing hardware into a room in the nursing facility where it remained (mostly unused) until his death. By virtue of being relocated to smaller facilities, residents have evidenced a diminishment of various abilities, be they physical and/or cognitive. The incorporation of computers into residents' rooms in these facilities, where a fair amount of privacy is surrendered in the name of care, serves more than just the function of computing. The machine acts as an important symbol of competence which is vital in a context in which this trait is undermined. An Assisted Living residence and even more so a nursing care center,

is arranged physically and organizationally to be public and, in such an arena, the control and concealment of frailty permitted at home are no longer possible. The reverse is true; frailty is revealed and exposed, with the consequence that personal power is diminished, so that the [Assisted Living] residential setting cannot be seen as offering a power base from which older people can engage in real, social and material transactions with others. (Willcocks, Peace and Kellaher 1987, 8 -9)

## *7. Assistive I-C Technologies*

With the watchword of "aging in place," research in assistive technologies designed to smooth the aging process is growing and being conducted on a global scale.

We are seeing the design of entire communities that have built-in features that allow people to 'age in place,' including transportation, communication, and social participation opportunities designed to meet the expressed needs of seniors and, in some cases, to promote intergenerational social learning and support to seniors so they feel like a part of the community. (Hammel 2004, 122)

Hammel has a comprehensive view of assistive technologies as any device that improves functionality; this ranges from pill splitters and eyeglasses to commodes and computers. To what extent did Flamingo Park foster the concept of aging in place? Many of its facilities were built nearly fifty years earlier and its buildings had only rudimentary levels of assistive technology, the most noteworthy of which were stair-less entrances to cottages and buildings. The addition of small carts for intra-Park transport and the vans and buses designated for extra-Park transport

were also an assistive technology for those with impaired mobility. However, those assistive technologies compromised earlier forms of such technology. For example, the Park's broad walkways, originally designed to accommodate wheelchair traffic, were congested with a continual procession of carts zipping to and fro. The mini vans also used these walkways as streets for fast connections between buildings. The high rise apartment buildings and the three story Assisted Living building had traditional external fire escapes that would be extremely difficult to navigate for all but the most fit of residents. None of the bathrooms in the cottages or older apartment buildings had walk-in showers; elderly residents had to step over tub walls to sit in their bathing chairs. The grab bars to aid this challenge were at the far side of the tub. In these same bathrooms, there also were no raised toilets. In the absence of wireless living environments, help can be summoned only by an "emergency alert cord" installed on bathroom walls, not useful if a fallen resident cannot get up. Researchers in the field of "gerotechnology" state that lower level assistive technologies such as grab bars and barrier-free design fall far short of the ideal.

Senior-appropriate technology must be self-learning, that is . . . must change, 'grow' and evolve with the demands of its specific user group. Seniors, after all, are not a group characterized by somatic deficits; rather they are characterized by potentials and preferences that may or may not change with increasing limitations in physical agility. The synergetic dimension . . . asks for senior-appropriate technology that meets the needs of seniors and, at the same time, is able to adjust to increasing limitations in a senior's life. (Dienel 2004, 229)

Although aging in place is geared to helping older adults remain in their original homes throughout their life cycles, Flamingo Park's apparent enactment of the concept views 'place' as the Park's three stages of residency. Thus, when cottage dwellers are no longer able to climb over their bathtub walls, so to speak, they have no choice but to move to an assisted living environment. But there are a growing number of technologies—like the automated activity tracking and analysis systems—that are designed to allow even frail elders to avoid repeated relocations through the CCRC stages. These monitor their activities remotely, "using software capable of identifying subtle changes . . . in specific activities . . . [in order to] detect changes in behavior that may signal changes in functional and medical status before they become a crisis" (Kutzik 2004, 132-33). Although most Park residents fended for themselves when it came to acquiring assistive technological devices for personal use (see Samuel Dunlop's profile in Part II), the Park did allow the use of its facilities for meetings of agencies such as the Lighthouse, which provided information on the availability of such devices.

A variety of new products can help “older people . . . become more involved in the digital age” (Taub 2009, B8). They feature louder audio, larger buttons, and displays which are designed to meet the physical challenges of older users. With regard specifically to computer use for connectivity, researchers in the field of gerotechnology have considered the barriers to Internet access under the umbrella of assistive technology. Citing a study that found that “older adults have been shown to be enthusiastic about learning how to use computers and especially the Internet *when training opportunities are made available* [italics in the original],” Morrell, Mayhorn and Echt (2004, 74) stated that Internet use by older adults could be assisted through a variety of factors like reduced costs of hardware, more computer placement in public venues and senior residences, simplifying website designs, provision of broadband connections, and the provision of training classes which include instruction on how to assess online trustworthiness (79). This last factor (which was of continuing concern to Park resident, Barbara Howard, for one) is described in greater detail by Benbow (2004).

There is a wealth of research in the field of Human Factors that chronicles the ways in which declining sight and hearing, loss of motor control, and memory lapses compromise the ability to learn new or complex tasks (Charness et al. 2001; Ellis and Allaire 1999; Hollis-Sawyer and Sterns 1999; Jones and Bayen 1998; Kubeck, Miller-Albrecht and Murphy 1999; Morrell, Mayhorn and Bennett 2000; Mead et al. 1999; Smith, Sharit and Czaja 1999). But, as these are laboratory-based studies, they do not tell the whole story of the ways in which individuals so hindered devise solutions to try to ameliorate these challenges. Nelson Jones’ strategies to see despite his nearly non-existent eyesight, for example, involved the use of a visor to eliminate monitor glare and the use of binoculars to see the large projection screen at the front of the room at the Computer Club.

How then did Flamingo Park address the issue of computer and Internet access for its residents? In the absence of a computer center or room with hands-on training opportunities, Park residents were on their own. Yes, there were free lectures every other month on subjects of general interest by an outside speaker, but as some Park residents said, such talks did not generally connect to their home computer challenges. However, there was one curious exception to the above scenario. Through resident fund-raising efforts, three or four laptop computers were given to the Nursing Care Center in the Park. It wasn’t clear for whose use they were intended, however; was it the temporary patients recuperating from surgery or was it visitors to NCC



residents and patients? Most of the residents in the NCC would have required sophisticated technological assistance to use any computing device, but that was not outside the realm of possibility in the view of one company which manufactured such devices.

It's Never 2 Late has created customized, state of the art, adaptive computer systems for nursing homes, assisted [*sic*] living, and independent living communities. The adaptive computer systems are portable and include flat panel touch screen monitors with extendable arms, wheel chair adjustable work stations, and peripherals for a variety of activities. Included with the software is a picture-based interface designed to launch from a touch screen. The software can be personalized for every user regardless of physical or cognitive limitations. Also included with the system are therapy tools, including a virtual bike, a flight and driving simulator, and touch screen puzzles. Our idea is unique in that the systems are a complete package, addressing the physical, cognitive, and emotional health of the user. We also provide on-site staff training and support to ensure successful implementation. Content is continually updated to provide engagement experiences for residents and staff. (Sweeney, 2007)

Having access to such devices within a context of belief in and support for their use, the inhabitants of the Park Nursing Care Center might have had much brighter lives, and the rest of the Park residents would have fewer reasons to dread being transferred to that final stage of life. These possibilities were not, in my view, a likely eventuality in the Park community. In the main, Flamingo Park by 2009 was not at the leading—or even middle—edge of assistive technologies.

#### *8. Flamingo Park: What Kind of 'Topia'?*

Some residents such as Neva Evans so extolled the virtues of Flamingo Park as to provoke visions of a utopia. Others (Laslo Unterweg was not the only one) had a decidedly dystopian image of the Park. As a closed community, Flamingo Park had simultaneous utopian and dystopian features. For the hale and hardy, its (secured) natural beauty, choice of living arrangements, friendly neighbors, nicely appointed facilities, varied activities and opportunities for social engagement and service were the essence of one kind of utopian vision. On the other hand, a fair share of its fifty plus acres was occupied by structures and its streets and walkways eventually ended at fences. Thus, Flamingo Park felt over time like an unnaturally concentrated social system. For those whose mobility has become reduced due to illness and inability to drive it was even more intensely bounded. There are only so many turns one could make around the pond before meeting oneself coming and going.

Below the surface environment, the political and social infrastructure of the corporate body that owned the Park provided more fences and boundaries in the form of policies, procedures and preferred practices. These policies were represented and enacted by administrators and hired staff who were subjective and inconsistent in their decision making. Thus the power structure, like the living environment, was concentrated and stronger than the

larger entities of town and city. The members of any Continuing Care Retirement Community are to some extent captives, given the large sums of money they spend to buy into it. When members who for whatever reason fail to get along with these powerful agents, their lives can indeed assume a dystopian quality.

Dystopia is not only in the eyes of ‘malcontent’ beholders such as Laslo Unterweg, however. Having spent many hours visiting with people who were transferred to both the Assisted Living and Nursing Care Center, I can attest to systemic shortcomings, especially in the latter. Nationally, nursing care facilities for the elderly are profoundly understaffed and their residents therefore neglected. This was the case in Flamingo Park and increasingly so in the economic downturn of the late 2000s. The Park’s neglect of its NCC residents was more benign than malignant and consisted of a lack of individualized care; hospital-like rooms, and a definite lack of freedom of movement beyond the building doors. This was the case for the cognitively sound as well as those with serious dementia. Thus, the NCC was comprised of captive members, which can be one definition of a dystopia.

In general, the flawed nature of Flamingo Park inhered in the conservative nature of its policies, its lack of vision for resident well-being (especially for those in the third stage of life there) and its seeming insularity from rapidly changing cultural forces and technologies in the broader society. In a corporate entity which exists to manage the lives of older adults, perhaps the administrators (those in the Park seemed to have indefinite tenure) are bound to be patronizing and condescending. This situation is not the ideal foundation for a utopia.

### **C. The Computer Club**

#### *1. Meeting Barbara Howard*

A favorite gathering place for some residents, was the Park swimming pool, which had a sun deck and nearby hot tub. Besides casual swimming, there were “aqua-robics” and exercise classes several mornings a week and other, planned events like the Senior Contest swim meets. Since I swam at the pool when visiting the Park, I observed that this recreational area was another, vital locus of informal information exchange as people did their water-based exercising. In fact, it was there that my own information horizons regarding Park behavior were unexpectedly expanded. After my early morning swim, a woman joined me at the rinse showers. She complimented my swimming ability, and we struck up a casual conversation. She introduced

herself as “Barbara Howard” and asked me the usual questions as to whom I was visiting and where I was from. When she heard that I was affiliated with the University of Illinois, she told me that she had a son working there and when during our talk about academic programs I mentioned my interest in the study of how people use computers, she told me she was a member of the Park Computer Club. She immediately invited me to come to their next meeting to be held a few days later. At the time, I did not know that Barbara Howard was to become my ‘native guide,’ my cultural broker and my friend. I could see that she was bright, active in the Park, vigorous, spare in body and speech, and I found her very likeable.

## *2. First Meeting With the Computer Club (1996)*

On the appointed night, I arrived at the small room inside the Assembly Building, just as the meeting was starting, at 7 p.m. Barbara, my host, had evidently forewarned the members of my expected arrival because I was immediately called by name and heartily welcomed. Don McDonald, an outgoing man full of (as he described them) corny jokes led the free-form meeting. Among the attendees there were ten females and eight males who included three married couples. Twelve people stated that they owned computers; two of those people had computers, and two people (one female; one male) mentioned that they considered themselves “computer illiterate.” About four individuals indicated that they had owned and/or had been working with computers for some years. At least one or two individuals mentioned that they didn’t yet own a computer but wanted to try to learn something about them in order to determine if they were interested in buying one. Only one person—Marian Probst—identified herself as an owner of an Apple-brand computer.

Don asked several people to report on the outcome of the letters they sent to Park administrators regarding computer facilities for their club. They were excited to have received a positive response from the Head Administrator, who praised their endeavor and said he would donate to the club an IBM 386 once his offices updated their equipment. He said he would keep in mind their request for a computer lab or space in which they could gather computers for general use. (Through 2009, this had not been arranged.) The group had asked him for a printer and modem and, eventually, equipment that would allow overhead projection of a computer terminal for teaching purposes. There was then some discussion about high vs. low powered computers—which should people buy? Don urged members to buy IBM clones and learn MS Windows, either the earlier or later versions. He discussed computing power and mentioned

“386”s and “Pentiums;” he tried using homey analogies to explain processor power. For example, he compared a 16-bit system to two eight-lane highways. Several men jumped into this analogy by commenting on their cars or cars they wished they had. They compared their car engines to computer power; this brief exchange was animated and jocular. The consensus of these male opinions was that bigger or more is better. Later, in our private talks, several of the women CC-goers made wry comments regarding the male Club members’ comparison of computers with cars. This gendering of computer technology has been extensively reported by feminist scholars starting in the 1980s with, for example, the classic works by Benston (1988), Kramarae (1988), and Turkle (1988); I examined the issue of gender and computing technology as reflected in popular movies of the 1980s and ‘90s (Linton 1996). The issue was not, however, highlighted by any of the Park residents with whom I subsequently spoke, nor was it offered as a reason for the disinclination of the majority of residents (female) to use computers.

After some attempts by Don to explain aspects of operating systems and some command language, Marian P., sole Macintosh user, commented that all this aggravation could be avoided by using Macs; she expressed vague irritation with their “wasted efforts,” which prompted Don to offer this explanation to the group, “Macs are like Windows 95.” Don then turned to the topic for the evening which was supposed to be “hard drive crashes” and “backing up of files.” He tried to keep the discussion on target but, given the various levels of experience and interest, the conversation meandered. Al Swenson, another man who was eager to share his considerable computer experience, was asked to address the topic of “viruses.” He also attempted to explain aspects of the Internet and searching. In response to my question about their Internet connections, seven members said they belonged to “SLIN” and ten said they used JUNO for e-mail. Al explained that SLIN stood for Sunland Library Information Network and was a “freenet” organized by area libraries across three area counties; it offered e-mail services for members. Al shared his discovery of a free e-mail server, JUNO, which was available at Blockbuster video stores. He gave me a news article from a local paper on JUNO and two other Internet providers, as well as information about SLIN. Although Al made a valiant effort to explain the Internet, he mixed in a number of computer applications that were not Internet based, and it was obvious through the questions posed by the group that they had little understanding of “it,” and that their only online experience was e-mail. Their leader, Don, disavowed any interest or knowledge of the Internet.

Seeing a way that I could provide some service, I announced that if anyone wanted to remain after the meeting for another fifteen to twenty minutes, I would clarify for them some points about Internet functions and searching. About half of the group remained behind to listen to my explanation of Internet searching, search engines types and construction and graphic browsers versus text browsers. They were eager to understand these Mysteries.

Earlier, during the meeting, two individuals asked me to contact relatives at the University of Illinois upon my return and everyone seemed pleased to have an interested guest. Before the group dispersed for the night, I offered them a trade. I would help with their personal computer systems at their homes in exchange for some introductory information about their computer use and “information needs.” Several expressed interest and gave me contact information; two others expressed regret that their schedules didn’t allow for a meeting before I was scheduled to leave Sunlanda. During this 1996 visit, then, I was able to meet with four of the Computer Club members and to ask them about their computer-related interests; I met with the Club leader, as well.

### *3. A Brief Meeting with Computer Club Founder Don McDonald*

Don Mc Donald, then age 70, agreed to meet with me to tell me about the Computer Club history. He and his wife had moved into the Park three years earlier, and he continued to work in sales and distribution. In November of 1995, Don was an MC at an “entertainment night” in the Park. At that event, he raised the question of starting a computer workshop, and a significant number of people indicated interest. He then approached the Park “activities people” with this idea, and they asked him if, in the absence of computers, such a class would be possible. Don had said that the first step should be to determine if people really wanted to learn about this subject. By January, 1996, nothing was being done so he approached the activities people again and asked if there was a problem. If not, he was going to announce an eight-week workshop. The administration then asked him what subjects he would like to cover and he said he would keep it “simple,” and not try to cover the “origin of computers.” Don placed one paragraph in the Park’s *Weekly Flyer* in which he proposed a two-hour session for eight weeks. Subsequently, he and his wife received more than seventy calls of inquiry; at the first meeting, there were one hundred fifteen people in attendance. No one had anticipated so many people and they had reserved only a small meeting room; as the numbers of people grew, they kept bringing in more chairs and eventually had to move the crowd into the main hall of the Assembly Building. After that initial

meeting, a core group developed and future meeting agendas were determined by the attendees' interests.

To the first Club meeting, Don brought a computer, hard drive, disks, cable and printer. His agenda was "why the computer does what it does" and his plan was to instruct on word processing, spreadsheets and databases, "not realizing that these people have a madness for the Internet." Donald complained, "they don't know anything about backup" or other things. "They're not interested in the engine of the car; they just want to get the key in and start up." Don told me that he "want[ed] to get them past the novelty of the Internet, not that it doesn't offer a lot." He said that he was not "on" the Internet and was not interested in it, though he admitted that he believed there was "plenty on it." (Don mentioned that his son had a Ph.D. in chemistry but did not use e-mail, at that time.) He stated that too few people used libraries, adding that Henry Ford had complained about movies distracting people from reading. Don owned a "386 computer with 1 gigabyte of memory" which he used in his business, for order entry and territory planning. He explained that he had worked with computers for over forty years, if only dealing with supplies for them, such as printer paper. He used DOS and BASIC with a Windows 3.1 operating system. He used Windows 95 at work and during private consulting. Of the people in the Park whom he had been helping, one was a 91-year old man who wanted to set up a program for transactions in stock options; another was a man in his late 80s who was solely interested in Paintshop, Printshop, and word processing. Both men had 486 computers. Don had shown another man how to make a spreadsheet for car costs and other expenses and the man was also exploring the Internet, Don told me ruefully.

What initially inspired Don McDonald to suggest the first computer workshop was his desire to share his interest and his need for "baffle gab," by which he meant gregariousness. He compared the use of computers to watch repair; both constituted a solitary hobby for which people had to be alone. Park residents, he stated, "should realize that computers could fit into their lives. [A person] can sit at that computer and be completely absorbed. You don't need and are better off with no one around you. You can concentrate and focus your entire attention on resolving a problem." Another advantage of being interested in computers was that it could provide people with a "common ground of conversation." Most people, Don opined, were not good conversationalists. I asked Donald to tell me more of his opinion of the Internet. He questioned the longevity of this phenomenon and compared it to what he called fads such as CB

radios and cell phones. I asked him about business advertising on the Internet and he replied, “we are still going to want real stores.” “Masterminds developed the Internet,” Donald went on, and created dissatisfaction with one’s computer which had to be continually upgraded. Ten years ago, people had a hard time thinking of reasons for use of computers at home, Don mused. The Internet now allowed access to information “you shouldn’t have,” such as pornography, which Donald declared to be a reason for many peoples’ “strong use of the Internet.” Don McDonald communicated by e-mail about once a week with JUNO, so we exchanged e-mail addresses and he promised to be on the lookout for e-mail communication from me.

#### *4. A Summary of the Computer Club’s Interests and Function*

Members of the Club had a variety of computing experiences: (1) work—Don and a couple others—in which they used the computer to organize records of business inventory, transactions and also did data entry at a company for which they used to work; (2) personal business—Marian Probst kept household files, and one man in his 90s (not there that evening) was learning to use a computer to keep track of his stock/investment records and transactions; (3) hobbies—several women mentioned using a simple graphics program to create greeting cards; (4) communication—most members who owned computers had begun to explore e-mail and write to their children and grandchildren who had e-mail access (mostly in university communities); (5) information searching—only two or three had ventured along this road, trying Yahoo as their primary search tool; and (6) no use yet—one or two attendees had apparently not used a computer for any purpose.

Not only was Don the founder of the group, he was also its organizational force. He had been to the dwellings of quite a few members, helping them get started and figuring out their systems. With his jocular manner, Don worked to generate enthusiasm for computing and when he joked that attendees were at the meeting only because their kids had dumped their old computers on them, their laughter seemed to confirm his observation. He liked computer systems and trying to explain their functioning. His comment to me that computing was a solitary activity best done alone reflects the initial time period (before color monitors, GUI interfaces and search engines were widely understood and used) and attitude that computers were not designed as a means of group entertainment—or in Don’s view, as entertaining at all. Over the twelve years of our interaction, I saw Don slowly creep onto the Internet and by 2008 he was asking Al Swenson to help him get hooked to a broadband connection. He eventually found things to interest him—

such as Bible study groups—in the ethereal digitized realm. Al Swenson, the other knowledgeable computer-phile, was more quietly outgoing and enjoyed sharing information. He had the only substantial Internet experience of the group and his potential for becoming the co-leader for the club was apparent even though he was at the time only on the Wait List for Park residency.

Obtaining a computer was primarily a fortuitous matter for the members of the Park Computer Club. Many of them inherited their computers from their offspring or even friends and so had to start learning whatever operating system those machines happened to have. Others members were influenced by fellow residents like Don McDonald to think they should have an IBM clone with a MS Window's interface. Had Don been a Mac user, the Club members' computer-related lives would have been quite different, in Mac-user Marian's opinion. (Up until 2008, I met or heard about only three Apple/Mac owners—of the eventual, approximately 300 computer users—in the Park.) Since many Club members were reliant on family members for support and instruction, they inherited their ideas of computer brands. Similarly, many of the Club members might have been better acquainted with SLIN had Al not told them about JUNO for e-mail access. Had they started with SLIN and explored that community network, it might have occurred to some club members to approach the SLIN libraries for computer help or advice. The Computer Club was from its inception the major source of information and help for beginning and aspiring computer users in the Park. Their joint endeavors anticipated the findings of a later academic study on the training of elders on computer use in groups; as it predicted, computer anxiety and other problems were ameliorated through group support (Cody 1999).

Throughout the twelve years of my visits to the Park, the Computer Club changed locations twice, obtained one computer (which was upgraded three times, thanks to member contributions), added some projection equipment, and won eventual recognition by the Park as an official club. Its existence was mentioned once on the Park's promotional website. In 2004-5, Club leadership was turned over by Don M. and Al S. to two younger men, one of whom was in his early 70s and had a degree in computer science. (My 2008 interview with the then CC leader, George Brinkley can be found in Appendix E.) The club membership also shifted from beginning computer users to more experienced ones, and its agenda likewise shifted to the current technological developments for home computing. Its meetings changed from weekly to monthly and every other meeting was run by the professional computer tutor, Cody Peabody; no



meetings were held during summer months. It was Peabody who provided (for a cost) the “computer classes” mentioned, in passing, on the Park website; these classes were group-based with no hands-on instruction. This is to say that Park administrators had not, as of 2009, provided a public computing center as requested by Club members in 1996. A perusal of the websites of other retirement communities around the country shows that some do mention such a facility and several Senior residences in my own towns of Champaign and Urbana have them as well.

To conclude, it was my meeting with the Computer Club in 1996 and my subsequent discussions with its members who wanted to share with me their interest in new technologies, that provided the beginning inspiration for this research project centered in Flamingo Park. The comments of these four discussants and our mutual musings provoked many questions which prompted me to return again and again to the issue of how these older citizens were coping with new information and communication technologies. But it would be two and a half years before I could pursue these issues with the residents of Flamingo Park. During a visit to the Park, in the spring of 1999, I contacted Barbara Howard to say ‘hello.’ In a matter of hours, she had sent word to the Computer Club and then told me that they wanted me to come and make another presentation. A second talk prompted more attendees to ask me to visit their homes to work with them and their computers. And so continued what would become a twelve-year interaction and inquiry into how Park residents were coping with computing and other aspects of their lives.

## PART II: FIVE PROFILES

Although I did not choose these five profiles as case studies to represent theoretical points, they are illustrative of the longitudinal nature of this study. The criteria by which I chose them are:

- The existence of interviews and/or an acquaintanceship that span the greatest number of years, ideally as far back as 1996 (Barbara Howard and Samuel Dunlop, primarily, and Al Swenson with whom I spoke informally at that time).
- The largest numbers of combined interviews (Barbara, Laslo Unterweg, Neva Evans).
- The existence of more than two interviews in separate years.
- The existence of an interview in 2008, for conclusion of a long-range study.

These five individuals, as well as all of the others in Flamingo Park with whom I became acquainted, could have been chosen on other grounds as well because each one had a unique and noteworthy set of experiences with I-C technologies. Apart from the logistical criteria mentioned above, the five profiled individuals have distinctive qualities which make their stories compelling. **Barbara Howard** was the first member of my study and she became that by dint of her own personal traits of informed curiosity, community involvement and Computer Club membership. She impressed all who knew her by her unflagging determination to keep active and engaged with life despite many setbacks. **Samuel Dunlop** became, during the years of our acquaintanceship, very pro-active in exploring every kind of assistive technology to which he was introduced to deal with his eventual loss of vision due to macular degeneration. He was fortunate to have the support of two children living nearby and together they used his I-C technologies in creative ways. **Neva Evans** was unusual with regard to the total lack of family support she had in her efforts to use a computer. Her initial, solo journey was shored up by other agents such as local friends, the Computer Club and her personal ability to remain undaunted when blocked by technology itself. **Laslo Unterweg** was, when we met, at the very beginning level of computer use and his strenuous efforts to master—or at least use—the technology were impressive. Equally noteworthy was the strength of his negative response to his lack of success in that endeavor. **Albert Swenson** made himself known to me through his co-leadership duties in the Computer Club, and his keen interest in technology and computers was immediately apparent. He was one of the most knowledgeable and fearless users of all I-C technologies.

Each of the following five profiles is divided into several components. They are comprised of a chronologically arranged series of conversational interviews (consisting of narrative text and excerpts of transcripts). Each interview is followed by an “insights” section in which I draw out salient aspects of each interview. At the end of the series of interviews and “insights” there is a “general discussion” section which considers the entire span of the interviews and interactions with a given individual. References to other research findings are woven throughout the insights and discussions. While considering these five profiles, readers can make at least a part of the journey of discovery with me.

## CHAPTER 4

### A PROFILE IN PERSEVERANCE: BARBARA HOWARD (AGED 82–94)

My field notes of 1996 describe Barbara thus:

She is a small woman, slight of build and light of foot. She exudes energy, determination and seriousness of purpose. After a brief conversation, her keen intellect, wide range of reading interests and information-seeking curiosity is apparent. Her speech is measured and she articulates her words carefully, including their final consonants.

After our meetings at the pool and the computer club, Barbara Howard agreed, in 1996, to an interview for my study. She had invited me to come over to her cottage one evening at about 8 p.m. and was waiting for me outside in case I wasn't able to find her walkway in the dim light. Her computer was on an enclosed sun porch, which she had made into an office space and we remained there during our conversation. As we sat down beside her computer desk, her husband opened the door (which led into the living room), greeted me briefly and then went back inside, closing the door behind him. To begin with, Barbara wanted some information about the purpose of my questions. First, she asked me why I was taking notes during the Club meeting; I told her that I always took notes of any discussion or meeting I attended so that I could remember important points and new ideas. I also repeated what I had told the Computer Club about working towards a degree related to information technology. I told her that I was especially interested in the use of computers by mature women since I was myself an "older learner."

We began with my informal survey questions. She had been a member of SLIN for about two years and she wished she could show me that system. But she had been having trouble with her computer and getting on-line and could not connect with the library network. She was able to connect to JUNO (a free e-mail-only program) but she was unable to get to her "address book" to show me how that worked. Although she had obtained her computer from her son about ten years earlier, she had only added a modem within the last year. She confided that she probably would not have purchased a computer or attempted to learn about them without her son's initial assistance. She agreed with Don McDonald's (founder of the Computer Club) joke to the effect that the Club members were all computing because their children had given them the machines. I asked Barbara what, in her mind, the Internet was and she said it was writing to people here and there and looking up a lot of things. She was familiar with Yahoo, the search tool which Al

Swenson had extolled to Club members and which she had tried when on AOL. I asked her if she knew what the World Wide Web was and she said that she couldn't get into it often, that she "didn't know how to use the addresses right."

Barbara was interested in learning how to do searching on the Internet but she wasn't particularly interested in getting "pictures" because she had tried AOL for a year and recalled that the graphics "took forever" [to download]. While using AOL, she had tried to find information in an 'electronic' encyclopedia. As to where else she would turn for information, Barbara could only say that it would depend on the kind of information she needed. She was a devoted user of libraries and tried to go once or twice a month; she was at the library two days before our meeting. She belonged to the Friends of the Library association of the local public library. For information on current events, Barbara relied on TV, the Park paper, and the local newspaper. She read *Book Review* on a monthly basis. She occasionally listened to the local Public Radio affiliate.

Barbara did not want to upgrade her computer to Windows 95 because her daughter advised her against it, telling her that she didn't need it. I suggested that her daughter might be right in thinking that Windows 95 was probably too complex and overwhelming for her current computer experience and comfort level. Barbara had been listening to Don's Club lectures for two months and told me that both he and Al had been over to her home for quite a few hours to help her with her computer. (Just recently, Al had been unable to get SLIN operative for her.) She smiled in agreement when I remarked that I had noticed a tendency of males to talk about "specs," like they were doing at the Club meeting we had attended, and to get excited about increasing the power of their "engines." As I promised her I would, I shared with Barbara the talk I had given to Club members about Internet searching since she had been unable to remain that long. She took notes in a little notebook on what I said. She showed me the training manual on SLIN, which seemed to be focused on the on-line systems of the library network. When I said that the page on Boolean search strategies might be helpful for her use of the Alta Vista search engine, she asked me to give her some examples. Barbara said that she someday would like to visit the Louvre online and view their art work.

**Insights:** Barbara was energetically engaged in using many sources to stay informed. She did not evidence anxiety towards the computing process. I asked her what might be the source of fear among older citizens towards computers. Her reply was that "they don't see what computers

will do for them.” She was organized, taking notes on all that I said and sought examples for any subject with which she was unfamiliar. She was the only person I had met, besides Al Swenson, who used SLIN, the area online catalog of library holdings. After using a computer for close to ten years she was apparently comfortable with e-mailing and word processing but was inexperienced with regard to the “WWW” and interested to learn more about it. Based on my brief encounter with Barbara’s husband, I guessed that he was ill and later learned that he was suffering increasingly from the cognitive and bodily deterioration associated with dementia.

By 1999 when I encountered Barbara for the **second** time, her husband had died and she was living alone in her cottage. With a bed to spare, she invited me to be her guest during my stay in the Park and to use her cottage as a home base for my research endeavors. Since I had an intensive interviewing schedule that year, we each went our separate ways during the day. At breakfast, we worked on the morning paper cross word puzzle and at night she told me about the books she was reading at her book club. Barbara had a very active schedule that included volunteer work, fitness activities, committee and club meetings and computing. She typed up her book reports, made greeting cards with a large collection of CD-Rom programs and e-mailed family members. I was so busy interviewing others in the Park that she and I barely got around to conducting any formal conversations. However, while talking with Al Swenson on her porch one evening, I invited her to join us toward the end of that interview since Al kept calling comments into the living where she was reading. After Al spoke of the adult education course in computers that he had attended, Barbara added, “We went to an Elder Hostel (at a NY college) that was hands-on for a week.” After that she took another computer course or two at an area high school. In response to Al’s comment about the need for Seniors to prepare themselves through classes, Barbara remarked, “Well, the dumb thing [i.e. her computer] keeps changing. And, I mean, all these years I’ve been going and I still—every time I turn around, I have a problem.”

Earlier in that same conversation with Al, I had remarked that in the married couples I had interviewed in the Park, there was, typically, a sole or primary computer user. After overhearing this discussion, Barbara later added this trenchant observation. “Another thing about the men versus women, in one family; if a man gets a hold of it [i.e. the computer], he’s pretty likely to stay in front of it and she doesn’t have a chance.” After my interview with Al had

concluded, Barbara added her two cents about the proposition that the Internet could further Democracy, a topic I was asking about that year.

Barbara: I question whether the Internet has really that ability to be very definite, very authentic in a lot of cases. I mean, you see the news and you don't know where it's coming from, who's signed it, what kind of a slant it has. And I'm not sure but what that couldn't be used as a tool for the opposite of Democracy. If, I mean, something comes along on the Internet and says, "Don't do this, do this because it's gonna be a virus." . . . And people get panic[ked] and get fooled by it, get taken in by it and that same kind of thing could be true in other areas. People thinking they have the facts and [it may] not be that at all.

NL: Because it's unregulated, it's unauthenticated.

Barbara: And, people that have an axe to grind, can get lots of space for their message. And people who have opposite points of view don't realize that they ought to be there, getting the other side spread to.

NL: You say it might further the opposite of democracy; what would that be?

Barbara: Well, I was thinking, for instance, if we had another bigger uprising of white supremacy. That could easily take a hold with a group on the Internet and [they'd] say, "Send this to everybody on your address book." It'd be very convincing.

NL: I think the idea [of furthering Democracy] fails because it's such an expensive technology and so many people are excluded by virtue of that. That it's hardly reaching widely, not only in our country but elsewhere.

Barbara: Right. And so much of the stuff that people use even on Internet is inconsequential.

NL: How do you mean?

Barbara: Well, like—as far as this kind of subject is concerned—like marketing shirts. Even the book stores, you don't really know what you're getting, just from a title.

**Insights:** Barbara Howard was a doer, not a talker. As a former minister's wife and school teacher, Barbara was accustomed to service and had distinguished herself in Flamingo Park as a volunteer extraordinaire. In fact, she was a member of an elite group of ten "Superior Volunteers," for which she had been given a plaque that was hanging by her back door. Barbara was widely known and highly regarded throughout the Park for her efforts on behalf of others.

Although Barbara was naturally reticent, she was quite willing to speak her mind when it was warranted. Barbara held very strong opinions, especially in the arenas of social justice, politics and human rights. It was from her vantage point of political involvement and awareness that she regarded the Internet with a wary and watchful eye. With regard to her computing, Barbara after a decade of use was voicing her misgivings about the process, noting that she was having difficulty keeping up with the continual changes to the technology. Although I didn't pursue the issue at the time, Barbara's remark about computer hogging husbands was provocative, though she did not mention having to compete with her husband for its use.

During my **third** visit with Barbara, in August of **2000**, I once again stayed in her cottage and we resumed our routine of pursuing our tasks separately. On occasion, however, I accompanied her to her activities at her request. Following my stay with her in 1999, I sent Barbara a small gift of appreciation and, in 2000, I presented her with some gifts upon arrival. Barbara informed me, then, that the most valuable “bread and butter” or hostess gift I could give to her was my help with her computing problems. She got out her list. Throughout the summer Barbara had been doing the Park weekly flyer, substituting for the regular editor. She had learned about formatting but was unable at that moment to resolve a problem she was having with columns. She was struggling to create a page with text at the top and columns beneath. One problem we discovered was that Barbara had been overlooking drop down menu choices that gave her options for the task. When we weren’t able to resolve the column dilemma by the deadline hour, Barbara reverted to the original cut and paste method for eventual photocopying. Barbara had mastered many other graphics challenges and showed me one of them of which she was proud which was an upside down answer box for a puzzle.

Another problem to be solved was figuring out how to send a fax with a Quick Link program. Barbara had no instructions for its use and as we worked through it, we couldn’t determine which of the extensions—hfx, qfx or rec—were required. Finally, she decided to try to obtain further directions from the woman who had given it to her. We had more success in practicing how to use aliases for her address book and in organizing her desktop. Barbara had a voluminous collection of CD-ROM clip art and showed me some of the choices in her Publishing Manager set. One of the highlights of Barbara’s week was the dedication (to which she invited me) of the Meditation Room suite at the Nursing Care Center, which was beautifully appointed and furnished. She had been on the decorating committee and was, along with two other women, singled out by the Administrators for praise.

**Insights:** Barbara and I had many interests in common and I know that she sincerely enjoyed my company during my stays in the Park. It was also apparent that my greatest value to her was as a close-at-hand computer tutor who could (in theory) help her with her many computing dilemmas. She was admirably frank about that and one had to admire her determination to utilize any resources that came her way. Barbara was still not comfortable with the Internet and did not in fact have easy access to it through her JUNO connection.



My **fourth visit** with Barbara in **March of 2001** followed the pattern of interaction we had established except that she was somewhat slowed down due to a recent accident. A few weeks before my arrival she had fallen off of her kitchen counter while standing on it to clean her upper windows. Amazingly, she had suffered only bruises and whiplash to her neck from which she was still sore. We were soon enough seated at Barbara's computer trying to whittle down her List. She had joined the Toast Master's club, a local chapter of which held meetings in the Assembly Building, and was preparing a talk on yoga for which she wanted to create stick figures to illustrate positions. We explored the Paint program and found a tool that drew straight lines and that worked well enough for her. Some of the other computing matters we explored during my stay were MS Clipart, Outlook Express, making files in The Print Shop program and fax sending. By consulting a manual on Word that I had brought for her, Barbara was able to figure out how to create page breaks in her report for the book club.

A computing challenge of special interest to Barbara concerned the game of Scrabble to which she was devoted. Barbara had played (and twice defeated) Scrabble with a computer program, the "Maven," and next, she wanted to play with a live partner online. We were stymied, however, by a registration procedure. In the course of trying to get online we became frustrated by Barbara's JUNO Internet set up. We could not locate a box in which to type any URLs and Barbara kept trying to use the search box for that purpose. After a good deal of poking around we found that a URL box appeared under a menu item named "new." Despite that discovery, Barbara continued to try to type in a URL into whatever box she spotted first. Another complaint Barbara had with her JUNO mail service was that it often abruptly closed down and she was not inspired to keep trying to reconnect. (There seemed to be a time limit imposed on any, single logon and/or a time allotment per week or month that Barbara easily exceeded.) Notwithstanding the various snafus encountered by Barbara while using her computer, she was still able to declare that her computer was a "life saver."

**Insights:** Barbara was continuing to find many stimulating and rewarding uses for her computer. On the other hand, her use of the Internet was not progressing smoothly due, in part, to her less than ideal service provider. Being restricted to a time allotment was a particularly bad arrangement for her slow (compared with typical, younger users) explorations and response rate. Her frugal nature would not allow Barbara to pay to be connected to a more robust company

although if online Scrabble had been her only option for playing, Barbara might have reconsidered that decision. As it was, she had plenty of live partners in the Park to play with.

Another year had rolled by before Barbara and I saw each other again in February, **2002** for our **fifth** visit, during which I once again stayed in her cottage. I had hoped to review her early history with computing because, in the wake of comments she had made in recent years, I found that there were gaps in her original account. At that time she mentioned receiving her computer from *one* of her sons but subsequently spoke of the involvement of both sons and her daughter. She was happy to provide a more detailed account. Her younger son, accomplished in the biological sciences, had given her the computer but was not as “knowledgeable” as her older son who taught in the social sciences.

Barbara: When I had questions—in the early days many of them—I had to call him [the older son]. And at that time we had one telephone not beside the computer and I would run from one to the other. And he said, finally, ‘Mother, why don’t you get another telephone?’ which helped a great deal. It still was a long distance call. And my husband and I took a course at an Elder Hostel . . . thinking that it would solve all our problems. And we came home to find that we had been on a generic program which had no connection with my questions.

NL: What year was that?

Barbara: Oh, maybe—long time ago, maybe ‘88. I was one of the early people [in her pre-Park community]. And there was only one man who had a computer that I knew of. And he was the kind who would sit at the pool and read a big fat manual. And I felt intimidated by having to ask him questions ‘cause he knew so much and didn’t seem to encourage questions. Well, he would help; he helped me with graphics. And that’s about the main thing I remember. . . . At that time I was secretary of our homeowners group. And the man who was president was a stickler for details and corrections and so I learned to rewrite a lot of my word processing.

NL: So word processing was your first—it wasn’t e-mail that got you [involved].

Barbara: I didn’t know what e-mail was until I came here . . .

NL: Was your husband experimenting, playing with it at all?

Barbara: He was interested. He took the class at NY State but his eyesight was failing rapidly and he never did really get a hang of it. He was there wishfully but not—he couldn’t handle it.

NL: He wanted to share your interests?

Barbara: He was interested in it for himself. He had an idea he was going to write and he never got there because his physical condition just didn’t—. When he retired, he had had it really.

I asked Barbara if her husband ever voiced any opposition or resentment over the time she spent at the computer. In the first place, Barbara pointed out, she was then using her computer much less because she didn’t have so much time. In the second place,

he was not that kind of person. He didn't resent my Scrabble. He'd come and cheer on my opponent [we laughed]. When I would call him to come and read an e-mail from the kids, he'd share it with me.

The Howards moved to Flamingo Park in 1993 and Barbara recalled a large party at which one of the icebreaker game items was to find people who had computers. At the end, the social director asked for a show of hands by computer owners and out of more than one hundred attendees only five hands went up. Once again, in her new community Barbara was a lonely computer user until—several years later—a new resident, Don McDonald (who used computerized databases for his business), had the idea to start a support group for computing; his emphasis was on the fun of socializing. What then, had been the role of her daughter in her computer use, I wondered? Whereas the approach of her two sons to Barbara's computing use was a pragmatic one of "What do you need?" her daughter's was prescriptive: "Don't sit on the sidelines, Mother." She urged Barbara to keep up with the group, with "what everybody else was doing." Her daughter, Barbara speculated, knew that her father "wasn't with it any more and probably was looking ahead to my aloneness." Barbara's second computer—an upgrade to Windows 3.5—was given to her by her older son and was the inspiration for Barbara to take another computer class which like the ones at Elder Hostel wasn't very helpful.

[It] again, didn't have a lot of connection to me. I just didn't understand what the frame was. And so I didn't get a lot out of that either. And only after we got our screen for the computer club and we could see what was going on and how to do it and then go home and connect with our own was it really very much help. And then in the meantime, we had a man come into the community who was available for installation and emergency help. [And he] started teaching once a month class here and we felt like we had somebody at our elbow. And so, from then on, everybody felt much more comfortable because the thing could crash and it wasn't the end of the world.

"And then," I remarked, "Albert Swenson and I came along and promoted the Internet." "Well," Barbara replied, "that's what zoomed computer use here and I'm sure everywhere else." She told me how some Park residents had tried to explore computers through the more familiar technology of WebTV but few people "took to it" and everyone she knew converted either to TVs or to computers. Barbara repeated that she couldn't imagine having explored computers without the donations of her sons. "I had an electric typewriter and I just don't—I think it would have been too big a jump by myself." I ventured to say that given her spirit of inquisitiveness, competition and being in the stream of things, she probably would have eventually wanted to explore this technology. "But," she demurred, "I see a lot of other people who are saying, 'I'm happy, I don't need it. I have a telephone and—.'" Though incredulous, I repeated her statement

that “without the personal support” it wouldn’t have happened. “In my case, it was what did it,” she insisted.

Was her computer a source of therapy after her husband’s death, had it helped her in some way, I asked.

I’m sure it did because I got into graphics more which is very time consuming—[it] was when I was learning—because I was having to struggle and try this and try that. And I didn’t use the card programs as such, I did my own. . . . I didn’t spend very much time on Solitaire but there was a little transition. And then [during the] last couple years Scrabble has been a great help with—. I just didn’t know, you know, I had nothing else scheduled and felt like I needed something. . . .

Barbara said that her computer continued to be the diversion it had been following the death of her husband. And, she was pleased to report that her younger daughter had finally started using a computer. This youngest child and her husband did not have a television and eschewed “mindless things” and had resisted for a long time but recently started using e-mail “so we’re all connected. With three thousands miles away for two of them it’s an advantage. . . . She was the only one that was out of the circle.”

Once we had clarified Barbara’s family involvement with computers, she and I got down to the serious business of working on her computer concerns. She wanted to learn how to move files between folders so we practiced “copy/paste” and “drag/drop” between her “my documents” folder and one we created on her desktop. She figured out how to use key commands, bypassing the ‘edit’ menu on her tool bar. I showed her how to minimize her windows so she could see other parts of her desktop. We discussed browsers and Internet providers, looked up how to delete her “cookies” collection and deleted a large number of ‘gif’ image files. Barbara showed me how she had learned that by simultaneously pressing two keys so she could highlight more than one item. She wanted to know where “toolbar icons” came from and whether they were using up memory. We looked at the many “short cut” icons she had on her screen and decided they were all useful. She was doubtful about the wisdom of providing her credit card number just to sign onto an airline ticket program called “cheap fare” and decided to not do so. Barbara showed me her latest card creation, made for the 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of some Park friends.

Then we got to the big deal—her new Power Point presentations for the Toastmaster’s Club. One presentation, on “Virtual Reality,” had been inspired by a trip with her family to the “virtual reality room” in the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. She had supplemented that experience with an article on VR that she found online in a scientific publication, which she

described as an “authentic sounding source.” Barbara explained that she had had help with her first presentation and thereafter “struggled” on her own through a “hit and try” method. To get her PP slides to the meetings, she attached the files to an e-mail which she sent to another club member who brought his laptop to meetings and projected it for her. Barbara wanted to play her favorite PP show for me which was on funerary customs and titled, “Afterlife, oh the choices;” she started with the Egyptians. She had incorporated eighteen graphics that she had found on the Internet or obtained from friends or from any one of the 200,000 images stored on her 13-disk collection of clip art. These graphics entered the slide frames from all sides creating a very animated show. I lauded Barbara on her accomplishments of finding, capturing, storing and then using these images and she said, “That’s one of the things I’ve really enjoyed.”

Barbara was continuing to play Scrabble with “Maven” and steadily improving her score at the intermediate level. I asked her to evaluate how the game of Scrabble—whether in person or in digital form—might help her brain. While she agreed that it aided her memory and word recall, she thought about it more broadly. “It’s just one of those things that’s a challenge and I respond to a challenge.” Later, she added, “I thoroughly enjoy it. When the kids come they know that that’s the entertainment.” When I remarked that I supposed that it was on her list of things to do with me, she laughed and said, “I was tempted to initiate it but I knew you have other things to do.” While working at her computer, I asked Barbara if she would be interested in taking a look at and evaluating a website designed for Seniors, called SeniorNet. We didn’t get too far with that endeavor because her JUNO Internet connection continually shut down every few minutes. Would she consider paying for a better connection, I asked, to which Barbara replied that if she didn’t have Scrabble she might be more interested in using the Internet. She claimed that the Internet overwhelmed her because she didn’t know how to get the information she needed and she attributed her inability to navigate to a lack of formal training. “I’ve never had any real courses, this is part of the problem.”

**Insights:** Barbara was the only person I had encountered in the Park who so clearly expressed her concern about the authenticity and trustworthiness of the information resources she found on the Internet. And what a disconnect there was between her assessment of her Internet searching skills and the reality that I witnessed. Since she often cited finding useful things online, one can only wonder at how many more times she had tried and failed. Part of her frustration was surely due to her very weak connection in the free JUNO program. How could

anyone succeed in exploring the Internet when allowed on it in only several minute increments? The second noteworthy disconnect was between her formal classes and her home computing. She had required a more exact match between her operating system and computer interface to that used in the instructional setting. Without a familiar interface appearance she could not recognize the contents or extrapolate the functions between the two contexts of classroom and home.

Notwithstanding what she perceived as the uselessness of the formal instruction she had received, Barbara was managing to accomplish a remarkable number of things with her computer. Whereas it had once been a glorified typewriter, it evolved into to a rich resource of visual pleasure. Her early interest in graphics was encouraged by even the modicum of help proffered by the manual-reading pool-sitter in her former community. And her creative use of graphics had continued, becoming a major source of satisfaction for her and others with whom she shared them. Barbara's use of the Internet though limited and strictly practical, was a source of interesting information for her the extent of which she may have understated or undervalued. While it is true that Barbara sought out and obtained much help from many sources (the computer club, the professional tutor, the other computer users in the Park, family members and me), she worked and experimented tirelessly on her own as well. Though beset with constant blocks, bumpings, mishaps and mistakes, she had the resilience to keep pushing through her confusion.

Barbara's family history contained many revealing and touching instances of the course of I-C technology at the very personal level. Three of her four children saw the future well enough to help prepare her to live in it. While her sons' help and attitudes were pragmatic, her daughter articulated the social ramifications of her father's probable exit from the family and Barbara's need to cope with that dramatic life-changing event. In turn, Barbara eventually understood the need to perpetuate the family circle through the technological means at hand and helped bring her last child into the fold. And, we must not overlook the fact that Barbara's husband was, while he lived, supportive of her interests and shared them with her if only wishfully. It was the diverting demands of her computer learning that in some measure helped Barbara weather the loss of her husband as well as the unsettling loss of the familiar structure of her former existence.

In **January, 2003**, I stayed elsewhere in the Park during my very short visit so Barbara and I had only a brief time together on our **sixth** visit. Barbara shared with me her pleasure in the accomplishment of one of her daughters who had recently completed a master's degree in social work which made her the third of Barbara's four children to have an advanced degree. Among the few books that she owned, Barbara's favorites were the half dozen authored by one of her sons. Over the preceding holidays Barbara had hosted these sons and their families—eleven in all—and they had presented her with a new computer monitor. But, she confided, when she saw the “Dell” box delivered she feared that they had bought her a whole new CPU, which would have been problematic. She wouldn't have wanted to confront the challenge of reinstalling all of her programs. Barbara had upgraded to a “gold” level on JUNO but she was still being disconnected before she was ready to exit. In the preceding summer she had once again done the Park flyer and her more recent computer uses were to make posters for various Park functions such as the upcoming Thrift Shop sale. During a conversation we had about the lack of public Internet access in the Park, I stated that they should have at least one area with either a computer or an Internet connection. Barbara wrote down my suggestion but told me that some residents had already decided that that was not needed because visitors to the Park bring their own laptops. But how would they be able to connect to the WWW, I asked. They seemed to be missing the point that in a non wire-less environment a laptop was not of much use for connecting with the outside world.

**Insights:** In 2003, there were still very few people in Flamingo Park who considered the Internet to be a vital resource. Some residents may have concluded that computers were important—possibly for practical and business matters. But even they viewed the computer as a self contained unit, not primarily as a means to connect with other computers or the rest of the world. Or, alternately, they had only a murky conception of what was entailed in establishing this connection. For that matter, getting (or staying) connected wasn't an altogether easy or affordable procedure for many inexperienced or untrained potential users. Barbara's fear of a gift of a new computer pointed to the difficulty inherent in keeping up to date with cultural forces. One had to perpetually upgrade ones personal technologies.

Six months later I returned to Flamingo Park and once again Barbara was kind enough to host me; it was **June/July of 2003** and this comprised our **seventh** visit together. Barbara, just a

few weeks away from her 89<sup>th</sup> birthday, was still mobile, active and self-sufficient. She brought me up to date on all our mutual acquaintances and her family members; she had, for instance, recently visited her son on the west coast to see his new house. On the other hand, she had not been to any Elder Hostels of late because she couldn't find any subjects that interested her. Soon enough we got to work on her List. Barbara asked for help in paying her phone bill online. Once again, she tried to type the URL in the search box since it was the more prominent box on the screen. She wondered why nothing was happening during the time a file was being downloaded to her computer so I pointed out a few clues—the light flashing on her CPU, a blinking arrow rather than a cursor, and a green box bar filling up at the bottom of her screen.

While we waited for that file to download Barbara told me that she had been having memory lapses and couldn't recall words when she wanted to. Recently, when trying to remember "conductor" she could only say "orchestra leader." In the morning crossword puzzle, she was not able to summon up the word "ami" which I had supplied when doing my part of the puzzle. Barbara had always taken pride in her knowledge of 'foreign' words and later in that day she remarked dolefully, "I know the word, 'ami.'" Barbara asked me what she could do about these memory gaps and I told her that she was doing all that I had read about. She did a crossword puzzle every day; she read a great deal and played Scrabble several times a week. However, I also had noticed that Barbara's memory was less robust than in previous years and that the content of her e-mails was repetitious and more sentimental in expression.

Over the next few days of our time together, Barbara and I interwove working on her computer and sharing her Park activities. I accompanied her to her fitness workouts (bike riding and weight lifting), to the large-print library to check out books, to her volunteer stint at a BINGO game in the NCC, to a ping pong game (for which she had a male partner using a walker) and a meal in the Main Dining Hall. At that meal, our dining companions asked Barbara how she knew me and she told them that she had heard me speak at the Computer Club and had introduced herself when she heard that I was associated with the university where one of her sons worked. Meantime, back at her computer, Barbara and I worked on the Power Point presentation she was going to give at a future meeting of the Toast Master's club. She liked to use Power Point, she explained, as a crutch for her memory. For her presentation, she had been inspired to give a talk on education by a list of famous school dropouts that she had found online. The message she wanted to convey was that the emphasis on testing in schools was interfering with



children's education. We worked—on and off—for two hours on creating a text that provided a logical and smooth transition from her starting point of dropouts to her end point of a proposed ban on testing. Later in the week we attended a meeting of that club at which Barbara had the role of a “talk critic.” Going to the podium to critique each talk she was simultaneously stern and kind, finding good and bad points for each speech.

There was, in Barbara's computing life, no end to the tasks she had or wanted to accomplish. She was about to tackle new address labels for her letter writing because the Park was on the verge of changing everyone's street names and numbers. She had recently completed a written history of the Thrift Shop and was going to be doing the Park flyer again during the summer. We worked on more items from her list of how-tos. She wanted to learn about attaching things in e-mails and what to do about continual messages telling her that Windows did not recognize files (extensions like “exe”). To my suggestion that she ignore them, she replied that she was trying to do so. I showed Barbara the place where she could find a history of the websites she had previously visited and pointed out that she could select any of them to revisit.

In preparation for her regularly scheduled evening of Scrabble games Barbara told me that she needed to replace her old Scrabble dictionary in order to update her knowledge of which new words related to I-C technology were now officially allowed. During the ensuing Scrabble session, Barbara played two games with Mazna, one of four regular partners. Later, when the games had ended, I found her to be somewhat subdued after being defeated in the second game. Her reaction underscored for me Barbara's fiercely competitive spirit and I concluded that it was one of the traits that fostered her determined exploration of new technology. Her computer provided an ongoing contest between herself and her machine to which she continued to respond.

**Insights:** Barbara remarked on a reduction of some of her cognitive abilities but she was still remarkably fit and healthy, even managing air travel on her own. Clearly, she was the instrument of her well-being, eating modest portions of a well balanced diet, exercising body and mind regularly and engaging fully in many of the activities the Park had to offer. One concerning health problem was the loss of her voice which was considerably huskier and more strained than before; she was receiving therapy for this problem.

In general, I noticed that Barbara was increasingly evidencing a stimulus overload and the sense of being overwhelmed by the amount of things on her computer screen and/or taking place as she computed. Specifically, I noted cognitive slowing in Barbara's ability to process

some of the information on her computer screen, by the fact that she had forgotten some of the computing skills she previously knew, and in her word recall difficulty (which surely impacted her Scrabble game). Nevertheless, she continued to accomplish a wide array of tasks with her computer, using it often and successfully. She evidenced a little more comfort with the online world, visiting Internet sites to obtain facts for her club activities, but her dial-up connection to it was no better.

It was noteworthy that Barbara's story of our first meeting omitted the fact that we met outside of the Computer Club, at the Park pool, and it was she who had told me about the Club and directed me to a meeting of it. I couldn't be sure if her omission was purposeful, wanting to bypass the pool encounter or if she had forgotten it. In any case, she was apparently recalling the most salient part for her—my connection to her son with whom I shared a university affiliation and a town residence.

That Barbara felt the need of a new Scrabble dictionary is a good example of how technology can have a retroactive impact on previous technology. Put another way, new technological developments insinuate themselves retroactively into earlier ones, changing them. Thus, if Barbara wanted to continue her reign in the realm of the older technology of the game of Scrabble, she needed to keep abreast of cultural changes and technological developments that were introducing new words into it.

Two years and four months after my previous stay with Barbara, I returned to the Park and her cottage; it was **November, 2005** and it was our **eighth** time together. Many significant changes had occurred in her life since we last met. In July of 2004, Barbara had been planning a big trip to the west coast for a gathering of her family to celebrate her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday in September. Unfortunately, two months before that event could take place, Barbara suffered a stroke and the paralysis of her left side. She spent seven weeks of her recovery time in the Nursing Care Center from where she wrote me a hand-written letter chronicling her recovery, a feat made possible by her right-handedness. While she was recovering, her entire family gathered at the Park to celebrate her birthday there, in the NCC. By mid-September, she wrote that she was due to go home but "my left hand is still not ready for the Dell (my goal) but we're working on it." By mid-October, she was back at her computer and she sent me a brief e-mail that illustrated the weakness and resultant "heaviness" of her fourth finger on the letter "s" resulting in a string of

“Ss.” She wrote that using her computer was part of her therapy, all of which was tiring and time consuming, but people assured her that her fast recovery was unusual. She reported that she had given up her driver’s license and was selling her car. (And, I noted from her e-mail that Barbara had signed up for AOL.) Then, in late October, Barbara tripped on the cane she had started using, fell and broke her hip, had replacement surgery and “five more painful weeks in the NCC.” In a hand-written note, Barbara said, “For the 1<sup>st</sup> time I really feel age has caught up with me.” Her computer-generated Xmas letter reported, “most of the family are coming for Christmas and to cheer me on.” In January (2005) Barbara typed a letter with no troublesome “s” string because, “a friend just found the cure for my multiple or pile up of letters from my lazy fingers! Of course it has problems like no double letters in a word without some finagling.” She also stated that she hadn’t been to the computer club “in months” and was “out of circulation.”

At the time of my November visit, which was about a year after her stroke and hip replacement, Barbara was somewhat slowed down, and used either a cane, a walker or a cart for getting around the Park. She continued to provide for herself and to live alone in her cottage, adequately accomplishing the tasks of daily living. The number of activities in which Barbara engaged had not diminished, as I soon found out by accompanying her to many of them during my stay. Since Barbara had become friends with a Park resident who was willing to serve as her once-a-week computer tutor, she did not have her usual list of computer problems for me to solve. She preferred, instead, that we share other aspects of her life, as my time allowed. Whether with me or alone, Barbara undertook the following activities in the few days I lived in her cottage: house keeping, laundry, hair dresser, dining out three times, going to her reading club, going to the fitness group for chair exercises in the Assembly Building, grocery shopping with Park transport, receiving a visit from a nurse to check on a skin incision, attending the Toast Masters club, going to a doctor (after a call about a missed appointment), attending a Computer Club meeting, reading parts of Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* for a book club report, going to the budget meeting in Assembly Building, making multiple batches of cookie dough to freeze for holiday visits from family, and working at her computer.

Although the time Barbara spent on her computer was reduced to about an hour a day, her tasks were the familiar ones of letters, book club reports, Toast Master’s presentations, and card making. She had regular weekly meetings with her new personal tutor, Park resident Sturgis Johnson. He was the one who had helped her weakened left fingers by resetting the keystroke

touch in her computer preferences. Barbara sang his praises, “What he doesn’t know, he makes himself a note and goes home and figures it out.” But although Sturgis had been working with her for a year, Barbara continued to lament, “And still I have problems.” To my amazement, I learned that Barbara had done the Park flyer again the preceding summer despite her “bad fingers.” And since we had last met, Barbara had ventured into a little online shopping, with Amazon and another online company for her “meds.”

Some of the letters that Barbara was typing on her computer were done for her new “squire,” Spencer, a Park widower. Although he owned a computer, he hadn’t yet learned how to type, having previously relied on secretarial help. He was not progressing with his learning-to-type tape but believed that that was the first step for eventual computer use. Barbara, noting that he was always busy with Park committees and board meetings, was of the opinion that he would never learn how to compute. Barbara and Spencer and their mutual friends, Elizabeth Dickerson and her husband, Bob (who was failing from dementia-related problems) had formed a foursome, often dining together both inside and outside the Park. Barbara said that Spencer treated her to these meals in exchange for her letter writing on her computer.

Barbara and I finally took time out from our whirlwind of activities to sit and tape record a few remarks. For at least two years, she had been receiving therapy for throat problems and her stroke had further weakened it and compromised her speaking ability. Thus she spoke with difficulty and her natural terseness had increased. Therefore I limited myself to one formal question—what had computers done for her?

Barbara: First of all, they’ve given me something to do when I have a few minutes that I don’t know what else to do. They have given me a feeling of creativity in making cards, which I enjoy. They’ve given me the feeling of not being out of date, of being able to keep up with something ongoing, be able to do the summer flyer for [the Park], and secretary jobs or activities I never would have been into otherwise. Camaraderie with the folks who are into it and also have problems.

NL: Which leads you to a certain increased social interaction.

Barbara: Right. Of course, a better connection with my family, because we don’t have to worry about the cost of the phone call. I should have put that first.

NL: Do you think there’s something else?

Barbara: [eight second pause] Oh, I, I would think the crossword puzzles . . . and Scrabble I think of as keeping me moving in the brain area. And I’m sure that somewhere along the line the computer does that too. Although, no that is not my primary thinking, that those two—[she pointed to the Scrabble dictionary and crossword puzzle book I had brought her].

Barbara could not finish the sentence, but I confirmed with her that what she was trying to say was that she did *not* regard her computer as a major stimulation for her brain. I asked her if she was still playing Scrabble with her computer program (the name of which she couldn't bring to mind, saying it meant "brainy") and she said no, that she had found an online partner, a woman with MS. It was only because of her desire to help this woman that she continued to play with her because most of the time she "beat the smithereens out of her." Barbara confessed that she preferred the computer program to online Scrabble because it was "more of a challenge. I can set where I want it when I think I'm matching, and then you can go to the next [skill level]."

**Insights:** It is remarkable that Barbara did not regard her computer as a brain stimulator. Apparently for her it was a practical device with which she did practical things. And she was so wedded to the idea of productivity and accomplishment with the aid of this device that her continued use of it was the goal that spurred on her efforts to recover from her stroke. It was in fact a lifesaver though she was reluctant to say so. Whatever her computer may or may not have done for her brain, Barbara realized its importance in keeping her up to date and "with something that was ongoing" in the culture around her. She appreciated that it fostered social contact and camaraderie with others and she recognized its value as a creative outlet and a means to structure her life (pass the time). And previously Barbara had acknowledged the therapeutic role her computing played while grieving for her husband's death.

A major stroke followed by a broken hip and major surgery would dim the spirits of many individuals. Barbara's spirit, however, seemed to be indomitable as she rallied after each of these setbacks to engage in prolonged and painful therapy. Again, she called upon her practical approach to life, doing what needed to be done to achieve a goal. This practicality was supplemented by her fierce spirit of competition; she would not be bested by illness. And, it may have been her medical misfortune that slightly softened Barbara's zeal to win in every contest. I had noted in her an interesting tension between two tendencies—competing/winning and service/charity. In an earlier year, Barbara had, after thinking it over, decided that she would not be able to find a worthy online opponent for Scrabble because, she reasoned, what intelligent person would be sitting at home *during the day* waiting for someone to request a partner for Scrabble. She had not warmed up to my suggestion that such potential partners might be bedridden or otherwise incapacitated. Yet, there she was, in 2005, allowing her charitable side to overrule her competitive side.

Barbara also appeared to be more sanguine regarding her physical and cognitive weakening. When I told her about her missed doctor's appointment, she was dismayed that she had "forgotten all about it" but stated rather casually that she was apparently "losing it." Perhaps she felt less alone—with her regular visits from her tutor, Sturgis, and her increased social life with squire Spencer and her best friend, Elizabeth—and therefore less daunted by the lapses in memory and cognitive sharpness that she noticed. Though Barbara seemed to dismiss the notion, I wondered whether she and Spencer had a future or whether it was as Barbara described, with her practical approach, that he was simply repaying her for her computing services. In any case, it seemed fairly evident that she was reliving the pleasure of being a part of a couple and foursome again.

It took three years to reunite with Barbara and it was thus, **October, 2008**, when we met again for the **ninth** time. In the intervening years, Barbara and I had continued to keep in touch and exchange information through letters (hand-written or typed), telephone calls and sporadically by e-mail. In early 2006, we exchanged several e-mails and in one of them she described the local excitement of attending the "opening" of the newly located Computer Club. Apparently that event included gifts for attendees and the one which Barbara received was a puzzlement to her:

I got a door prize, a flush bar (???), a little thin gadget to save volumes and also capable of Earth ?? that can map aerial views. . . . I was so excited about showing all my family at Christmas—and they all knew about it [i.e. its function]—even the 10 year old! Tra la. Anyway, I don't know what I'd do with my more limited walking without my Dell.

In January of 2007 (a year after my previous visit), Barbara wrote a letter from her hospital room where she was receiving treatment for a second stroke that had occurred when a medication was stopped in preparation for back surgery. She stated that her only relief from the intensive therapy was "a game of Scrabble every other day." She went on, "I hope to continue [with the] computer when I get home (I don't say 'if.')." In her letter, Barbara also mentioned that the Nursing Care Center then had several "usable" computers, the implication being that she might be able to use one once transferred there for further recovery.

Six months later, in a telephone exchange, Barbara told me about the most major change to date in her life at Flamingo Park. She had left her cottage and moved into Assisted Living because she could no longer prepare her meals with ease. "I'm just trying to keep alive," she

declared. After her old Dell was “knocked out” in a bad storm she replaced it but, woe, it came with the Vista operating system in place of the XP she had been using. And her personal computer tutor, Sturgis, didn’t know much about Vista. She was hoping to “call somebody” and get a disk for XP. She was worried about being able to relearn and reorganize her computer contents, “I don’t want to lose what I was in the middle of.” Barbara pointed out her unusual status in the Assisted Living building and culture. “[There are] only two of us with computers.” She again told me about the second stroke and the ensuing back surgery and repeated that she was just trying to “keep alive.” She said that moving to A.L. was not *the* problem but, rather, “it’s having to adjust to my situation.” Barbara was referring to the compromised physical condition that had placed her there. She was going to start a “bunch of therapy” the next day and she concluded, “Things will be better now.” At the end of our conversation, she urged me to come to visit her in her new room.

During the Spring of 2008, Barbara’s *typed* letters indicated that she was reasonably well and content, pursuing her usual activities. She described her reconciliation to her circumstances, “Though it is not like living independently, I have managed to adjust to Assisted Living. . . . It is not heaven but I needed it.” She planned to compete as before, in Scrabble, in the Senior Sports Week, and in addition she hoped to bring “honor” to A.L. in the basket ball toss game which had become part of her therapy. When, in the summer of 2008, it seemed as though I might be able to return to the Park, I telephoned Barbara to inform her of a possible visit and she was very enthused by the news. She was apologetic about not being able to host me as before due to her reduced quarters but she invited me to use her room as my research home base, as in the past.

Day One. Barbara welcomed me to her cozy room on the third floor at the end of a long hall which was as far away from the lobby entrance as one could be. Her computer/desk was a primary piece of furniture in that 12 by 12 foot space. Other furnishings included two rocker arm chairs, a small desk, a card table, a bed, dresser and nightstand. It was a tidy and calm space. I found her general physical appearance only slightly changed since 2005. Her small frame exuded the familiar determined energy even from behind a walker and her pleasantly quizzical expression was still neatly framed by short wavy white hair. Her functionality, however, was notably reduced. Her left leg dragged a bit and her gait was much slower and now dependent on a walker even within her room. Since her second stroke had further weakened her left side, the use of that hand was seriously compromised and she had to hold it up and at an awkward angle

to use the keyboard. Barbara's throat was seriously affected by both strokes causing her to cough often and to speak in a hoarse whisper. This only intensified Barbara's normal terseness and resulted in a greater fragmenting of her sentences.

Barbara updated me on her activities—no longer in Toastmasters Club but continuing with Keep Well Committee, Thrift Shop Committee, Scrabble twice a week and Book Club for which she kept reading “a lot.” And, of course, there were several kinds of exercise and therapy groups in which she participated. First on her agenda that morning was an exercise circle in which a half a dozen women gathered to practice hand-eye coordination games. I joined in, which pleased Dora, the director of the activity who needed more “warm bodies.” Not all of the participants were cognitively able to follow the game proceedings and some griped about the rules while another was angered over having to stay indoors. It felt like we were in the Nursing Care Center rather than A.L. On the way back to Barbara's room, someone greeted us and asked Barbara how she was. “I'm getting around,” was her reply. As I accompanied her to the third floor, I recalled a remark she had made to me a year earlier in which she spoke of getting as far “north” as possible in Assisted Living. I realized that she had meant as high as possible to keep away from the bustle of the lower two floors.

Back in her room, Barbara described several new projects about which she was excited. The most ambitious one was her biography project. Dora, whose duties in the A.L. were many—receptionist, activity director, records keeper—had instigated it. Some time ago, she asked Barbara to write something about her life for the A.L. weekly newsletter. Dora liked the result so much she asked Barbara to write about more of the residents in A.L.

Barbara: The secretary sets up the person and tells them what I am going to do. Gets them ready and we set a date. . . . [We are interrupted by a nurse's visit to discuss her medications.] I go to their room and start asking them questions. When I'm finished I tell them that I will type it up, return it to them and they have a choice of correcting my information or anything that they don't want to include and they give it back to me. I correct it again and turn it in to the secretary to be included in the weekly paper.

NL: And you're doing this all by hand. You're not using a tape recorder. You're writing the notes out. That is really a challenge, isn't it?

Barbara: That's all I have. And I use the computer.

NL: Well, so I don't understand. You indicated in your letters that you weren't using it because you couldn't understand the Vista system but you still can use Word, I guess?

Barbara: I use [long coughing]—. I'm using it more than I used to. And when I get stuck [coughs] “Sturge”—. Now he has the system—my computer on his computer. He can just tell me what to do.



NL: I'd be interested to see how he's done that. So, he's linked your computer to his computer and he lives here in the Park.

Barbara: He also has changed the font so that I can read it. At the top of the page. It makes it much easier.

Barbara stopped to count the number of completed biographies that she had stored in a designated red folder. She found a total of eighteen so we figured she'd been doing it for several months. I quickly glanced at a few of them.

NL: Some are quite brief and others quite long.

Barbara: Depends on the life they've had. And their importance in the—[showing me a sample bio]. This is a reject. Dora said this is not enough. She said [there's] a lot more. . . .

NL: So when she says it's not enough does that mean you're supposed to go back and try to get more?

Barbara: She knows her better than I do. She expected more. . . . I have three more that are rejects. I don't think they're gonna'—They just don't take to it.

NL: Right. I noticed that Margarite [a woman at the morning fitness circle] was definitely not following.

Barbara: She's way out. . . . She did it partly.

NL: Interesting. Well, yeah, maybe she could talk about her life. Just because she can't tell what game she is playing doesn't mean she doesn't know her own life.

Barbara: She is a woman who has walked ever since she's been here. All around. Now she has to have a walker or they won't let her go out. But, she would get [i.e. fall] on the ground or on the bench or something and have to be picked up by the cart. [she chuckles] The cart people have a code: 'purple, purple, pick her up.'

NL: [I read in Margarite's bio:] 'As a child she liked to jump rope and play jacks.' Isn't that an interesting thing to say? 'Vassar!'

Barbara: That's the amazing thing. And it says [i.e. suggests] what my husband found—an experiment of [on] people that lose their memory are very time—very often brilliant.

NL: I've read that.

Barbara: I'm on the way.

NL: Yes, I would say if you're losing your memory, you're among the brilliant.

Barbara: No, I'm on the way to be losing it.

NL: Well, Barbara, a lot of my synapses are no longer firing. You know, it happens. But I keep thinking we shouldn't compare ourselves to what we *could* do but just focus on what we still *can* do. And you're still highly functional, I think. If we keep comparing ourselves to our youth, then you just get depressed, don't you think?

Barbara: Well, I compare myself to two years ago.

There was no hint of self-pity in Barbara's remarks. On the contrary, she chuckled as she uttered these sentiments in her characteristic tone of realistic assessment. We continued with the subject of her biographies and as Barbara explained her interview method to me, I noted the irony of the situation. Of all those whom I had interviewed in the Park, Barbara's reticence made her a reluctant interviewee. Now, her most engaging project was as a designated interviewer.

NL: So do you prompt with questions or do you just say, 'tell me about your life.'

Barbara: No, I have questions. Sometimes I'll start out with something on the wall or—

NL: This is a great project, isn't it?

Barbara: I think it is. I've been very interested in it.

NL: OK, so you see something in their [room] that you ask about or you say, 'Where were you born?'

Barbara: Eventually. Not so much, 'Where were you born?' It's, 'Where did you grow up?' The men especially [about] their work. And the women, 'Well, why did you come from Canada to—?' or something about their family. One [of the residents] was the youngest of eight children and another one apparently took care of her children. She was the oldest. And she never married. She never did much in the way of exciting things you might say but she did the whole thing herself and it was just very interesting.

NL: So, did Margarine volunteer that she went to Vassar or did you say, 'Where did you go to school?'

Barbara: No, Dora knew that from her son.

NL: So how does Dora's knowledge figure into your write up?

Barbara: Well, because I didn't get enough myself, she supplemented it . . . She takes the privilege of saying, 'Did you find out this?' . . . [S]he knows there is more to come.

NL: How did she decide to have a resident do [this project] rather than she . . . ?

Barbara: I think she was going to do it. She was starting it on me. . . . I wrote it up. She asked me to do two paragraphs. So, ever since it's been in two paragraphs. . . .

NL: I'd like to get a copy of what you wrote about yourself in two paragraphs. Probably we could print that out from you computer.

As I put the copies of her biographies back in the red folder, I asked Barbara what else was "going on" with her and her computer and she pointed to a second red folder. This contained the products of her Google searches on trivia items that were part of her current Saturday morning book club. She had been enlisted to organize a fun Q & A segment for their meetings but Barbara was having difficulties with this assignment. The problem was that the club organizer used a digitized form for the trivia questions and Barbara was not able to transfer the Internet-based files onto the form. She told me that it had taken her up to two hours to try to "adapt" one trivia item onto that form. Others she was able to "lift up" much more quickly.

NL: You are saying with a 'copy' and 'paste' you can capture some of them.

Barbara: But adapt it. . . . I have to write on paper. That's the way I started it and I found it was too demanding.

NL: Do you know how to open two windows so you have a blank document beside the Google and you could just copy it? Read it and type it at the same time? Well, let's try doing that. You won't be writing out all of these things. . . .

We were looking at some of the trivia examples in the red folder; examples were the cost for a dog's life span, the number of glasses of milk a cow gives in a lifetime, the number of states bordering the Gulf of Mexico, the definition of a Cornish game hen and the ballet term for a 360 degree turn. I understood how this could appeal to Barbara, a former crossword puzzle fan whose word recall problems had lately lessened her interest in doing crosswords.

In Barbara's red folder, I also found some pictures of Barbara and of her close friend, Elizabeth Dickerson. Elizabeth was an accomplished computer user and a long time member of the Computer Club. I had hoped to talk with her while in the Park but she hadn't yet answered my note. I asked Barbara about her and thereby learned about another significant change in Barbara's social life.

NL: How is Elizabeth doing?

Barbara: She is about to start her first treatment for——[Barbara struggles to recall the word]

NL: Cancer? Chemo?

Barbara: Cancer, cancer . . . . Breast . . . . Yes, she just found out. She has been through a couple of things—surgeries.

NL: How's her husband who was fading?

Barbara: He died . . . . Over a year ago [coughs]. She has another— [prolonged cough. I turned the recorder off until she recovered.]

NL: . . . wait a minute here. She's got a boyfriend?

Barbara: She and her husband—I and my husband—Spencer and his wife used to go out to dinner and then as one and another faded down we kept the rest of us going so it was down to the three of us. And I knew it was all the time for her but I guess my kids thought I was interested. I just started going out to eat with him.

NL: Your husband died and Spencer's wife died and now Elizabeth's husband has died and so now Elizabeth and Spencer are an 'item.'

Barbara: Very strong. Immediately. And some people said,, 'Well—.' [Barbara's face and gestures express the feeling of shock on the part of some Park residents.] And it was a blessing because she had taken care of her husband so beautifully all these—all this time.

NL: How immediate?

Barbara: A month.

NL: . . . Well, I'm sure that this is a great support for her at this time.

Barbara: It was wonderful when she found this out because he would go with her to the hospital and so on. And then he started losing it. So now it's a double tragedy. He went along with her this weekend. But, I—I—I think it's pretty obvious.

NL: He has a medium level Alzheimer's or dementia? Is it happening fast?

Barbara: Yes. That's what struck me like you've never seen it happen—

NL: Happen so quickly?

Later that day, Barbara told me that Elizabeth had telephoned her and asked her to relay her regrets to me about not being able to meet due to her impending preparations for chemotherapy. She continued,

Barbara: She'd be a good one to [talk to]. [She] herself did the revision . . . [Barbara has difficulty speaking and bringing the correct words to mind so I put her ideas together:]

NL: . . . for the Senate for their rules or policies, procedures, regulations—something like that—for the whole community. So, she's still very active in that.

Barbara: Mmm hmm. She's very active in that. She's been very active in her volunteering. But as far as the computer's concerned, she uses it a lot.

NL: And how about her companion? Is he computer literate?

Barbara: No, he has one but he's never used it much.

NL: Interesting. I wonder why he got it.

Barbara: When he, when I first knew him, I was writing business letters for him.

NL: Interesting. Now she can do it.

Barbara: Yes, she does.

NL: He was looking for a computer companion.

Barbara: Right.

Our conversation inspired us to talk about some of our other Park acquaintances and when I asked Barbara if she knew the whereabouts of Neva Evans, she was reminded of another of her own current computer uses.

Barbara: Neva's the Chairman of the Keep Well Committee that I'm on. And that is something else that I am doing with my computer—taking minutes . . . for it.

NL: [Seeing some written notes] Oh my gosh, by hand? How often does that meet? . . . Have you ever thought about tape recording any of these things? Would that be useful?

Barbara: Oh, I doubt it would be, no, because I don't write what I'm going to use. It's just notes to myself.

NL: But then you type it up as an official record.

Barbara: I can't do it by hand as fast as it'd take—

NL: On your computer you are typing up the notes that you've taken at the Keep Well Committee meetings. You are doing trivia handouts for your book club.

Barbara: Trivia. Typed things is all—not just that—all kinds of things—the questions and answers.

NL: Questions and answers for the book club meeting which is once a week. Now you're typing up interviews for the residents in Assisted Living. What else? Oh! You're searching with Google [Barbara chuckles] for trivia and interesting things. What else are you doing, not that that's not enough!

Barbara: That's about it.

Intrigued by Barbara's friend Sturgis's help with her computer, I asked her for the details.

NL: When you say you and Sturgis are connected, can you talk to each other simultaneously or he just has everything that's on your computer on his computer or—

Barbara: His wife has just recently been found to be on her way.

NL: You point to your head meaning serious Alzheimer's or—?

Barbara: Well, enough to be noticeable. She has become his purpose in life to keep her as much active and as much with him as they can. He has just been wonderful. She comes here . . . three times a week to work at the [reception] desk at suppertime. And nothing happens but [so] she is able to do it. Then she does a little kind of game thing with the folks with the toys that move. . . . So while she is doing this, he doesn't want to be around to be over sighting so he comes up here [Barbara's room]. I can get [him] started on my list of questions and go to lunch or I can keep on—. . . Well, now with this system he has my thing on his desk. I can even ask him without him being here.

NL: You are saying he has your hard drive on his hard drive.

Barbara: My screen.

NL: He has copied . . . all your files and put them on his? Does he do this for other people as well? [she shakes her head] You're his special project?

Barbara: I was the first one. Elizabeth was the second one and most of them don't need him like I do. [chuckles]

NL: How did you link up with him? How did you meet? I know the last time I was here—

Barbara: [We met at the] Computer Club. But, uh, a couple times right when I was almost—thought of forgetting it [giving up computing] because I had to ask him so much. He said, 'Don't worry, that's what I am here for.' As long as he keeps having that attitude, I'm—. He does a lot.

Barbara showed me another photo of herself that Sturgis and Samuel Dunlop had jointly created. Sturgis had said that portraits were needed to accompany the biographies that she was doing of the A.L. residents, so he took the pictures and Samuel printed them on his color printer.

Our conversation was interrupted by a telephone call from Sturgis. He was confirming their provisional plan for a joint meeting with me at that hour so Barbara prepared herself to leave. As we were walking out, she said, “Let’s bring your little wheel [computer discs] around to show him for the computer.” Sturge (as most people called him) was waiting for us in the lobby of Highview Place and we found seats in an adjacent alcove in which to talk. He was tall, sported a goatee and had a broad smile that frequently erupted into a loud laugh that sometimes spilled over to a gaffaw; he had a discernible New York accent. When he heard that I was from Illinois, Sturgis exclaimed in his strong, loud voice, “Well, I assume you’re voting for Obama! Because he’s from Illinois. After a bit of conversation on the current political events, I jumped into the topic of interest.

NL: What kind of connection do you have between the two of you? A log-in—

Sturge: A lot of friendship. [loud laugh] . . . No, it’s called LogMeIn.com. . . . Wow. This is a great, free—notice the word free, right?—system in which I can log into Barbara’s computer. Get on the computer and make changes and so on just like the—you do when you go to a, uh, uh, one of these—like Dell, uh— I was gonna’ say the Philippines or wherever, and they say, ‘Can we take charge of your computer?’ Well, you can do the same thing. . . . Now, Barbara calls me on the phone and says, ‘Gee, Sturge, I’m stuck.’ And then I say, ‘Ok.’ And I log into her computer.

Barbara: I cry a few tears.

Sturge: And then her computer screen comes up and then I can make changes in it. She can watch. . . . They do this all over the world. I can do it to any computer in the world. . . . It’s on the Internet. In other words, this is a company that’s selling a service, actually. And the service is really good. It’s for companies and so on to do inter-company kinds of work.

NL: Right, she has to be online as well. . . .

Sturge: In other words, it’s an Internet connection. And I can connect with any computer anywhere in the world. . . . You have to first load some down ware—download some software onto that computer. . . . It’s a very huge system. My son put me on it because he is a real whiz in that sort of stuff.

NL: Her whole hard drive would then have to be stored online somewhere because you don’t want to—

Sturge: No, no, no, it’s on her computer. Her hard drive is on her computer. Just think about it this way. I go—once I connect to her computer I am in control of her computer. I’m in control of her hard drive, everything.

Sturgis suggested that we go to his computer where he could show me the connection. As we made our way to Sturgis’ apartment, I asked him about his background. He had once wanted to be a teacher but was dissuaded by his wife for practical reasons. When he eventually saw a use for computers in his work as a company executive, he took an intensive course and became “computer literate in two months.” He split the cost of his first computer with his daughter and thereafter bought a new one every few years. However, he had to confess that,

I always hated computers because of the detail involved. I tend to be a generalist and to think that a whole program could fall apart 'cause I put in a colon and not a semi-colon really just annoyed me. It should be smart enough to handle those kinds of little mistakes. And they're getting better at doing that actually. I mean you can go to Google now and just spell check.

Regarding his computer tutoring in the Park, Sturgis said that at one time, he was visiting fifteen Park residents on a weekly schedule and he agreed with my statement that he must have spent enormous numbers of hours doing so. He never charged for that help so why had he done it?

Sturgis: It's just the fun. . . . It's like 70/30 men/woman [i.e. women/men] kind of thing. And so many of the women all of a sudden . . . they buy a new telephone. What do you call those things? Telephone memory issues, recorders. Telephone—

NL: An answering machine.

Sturgis: Answering machine. . . . Ok, they buy that and they don't know how to hook it up so I hook it up for them. Their kids buy them a new camera and I show them how to use it. Stuff like that.

NL: And it helps you get acquainted. That would be a benefit to you.

Sturgis: Well, actually I did that on purpose. I'm an on-purpose type of person. So when I came into the Park I said, 'The first thing I'm going to do is get to know everyone.'

Other activities that Sturgis engaged in for that purpose were board membership, poll sitting and, more recently, acting as unofficial Park photographer. We seated ourselves in front of Sturgis' computer that he had placed on top of his wife's old sewing machine cabinet (which perplexed Barbara, prompting her to ask why his computer keyboard was level with the computer while hers was not). Sturgis demonstrated how he could access Barbara's desktop using a program called "Active X," claiming that, "I can do anything to her computer that she can do." Sturgis offered various explanations as to why Barbara had so many computing difficulties. In summary, they were: (1) the way Vista handled directories was different from XP; (2) she couldn't read her own handwriting in her pad of notes to herself; (3) her memory was flawed; (4) she failed to consult the how-to 'training' sheets he had written out for her and placed in her "my documents" folder; (5) there was too long a gap between various computing behaviors so lack of practice on any one; and (6) he hadn't been made aware of what she really wanted to do. Sturgis opened up his copies of his training sheets to show me but I had time only to note that they were extremely detailed. Regarding the ongoing problems with e-mail that so many people seemed to face, Sturgis said that he had been trying to persuade Park computer users to adopt the Comcast mail system which he claimed was easier to use than Outlook Express/Vista Mail. Sturgis attempted to explain his teaching approach as a computer tutor.

Sturgis: I tend to be simple and what I have learned is that when I have only learned one way to do something and then I always do it the same way. I try to get other people to do that and they go to the dining room and someone is telling them, ‘there is a faster way to do it if you do this.’ There are faster ways of doing things but the problem is if you try to do things two or three different ways then you forget which is the right way. Or a way that you understand and can deal with and so on.

NL: So I understand when you are helping people that it would help them and you if they did it the way you showed them every time. Because then you know what they’ve been doing and you can pick up where you left off.

Sturgis: And it’s the right way [laughs].

NL: It’s the Sturgis way.

Sturgis: That’s the same thing.

Barbara was tiring and wanted to return to A.L. for lunch. Just before leaving, Sturgis showed us some of the portrait photos he had taken to accompany Barbara’s biographies. Using a Photoshop technique called “liquefy” he had been altering many of the facial flaws—even apparently bone structure—to make his subjects look much younger. One example was of a woman aged 75 whom he had made look “pretty glamorous.” Barbara was pleased with Sturgis’ photo of her in which she appeared considerably younger.

To my surprise Barbara had one of her lists for me, notwithstanding the fact that Sturgis was helping her three times a week, so we sat together at her computer once again. I narrated our actions in any tense (present, future, past) that seemed relevant at the moment. This audible narration allowed Barbara to simultaneously *hear*, *see* and *do*. I offered to provide her with a transcription so that she could remember how we did what we practiced together. Long ago we had adopted the convention of referring to her in the third person, when we did this. The following is my tape-recorded narration. I include this and the subsequent lengthy passage to provide a detailed example of the nature of Barbara’s problems. They also illustrate the fact that she no longer remembered many of the basic computing tasks that we had practiced together in the past.

Barbara wanted to get to Google. First, we got Internet Explorer open and Barbara did not know there was a Google box up at the top which when activated allows you to type in a search term. So we typed in ‘trivia’ and we’ve gotten several trivia responses. She has gone to *useful trivia.com* ‘an archive of miscellaneous pedantry and other useful stuff.’ What a surprise, Barbara chooses political trivia this time [she chuckled]. We’re trying to find a way to get the font larger. Doing the ‘windows key with the plus sign’ doesn’t do it on this Google site. Barbara is looking at other menus to find a way to do that. Under the ‘view menu’ there was a ‘text sized’ option, which was on ‘medium’ so we put it on the ‘largest’ option, which does enlarge the font. Now, we have practiced enlarging and reducing the size of the windows with the two little boxes between the dash and the X. We toggle back and forth and we can make the window smaller and it is also then moveable. Or, we toggle the other way and make the window large again.



Next, we practiced ‘copy and paste’ in ‘editing.’ Barbara had only done it with shortcuts on the keyboard and didn’t know about the ‘edit’ menu. She then wanted to capture an entire segment of the Google geography trivia question so that she could erase it. But she wanted to erase it in the Google website and couldn’t understand why that wasn’t possible. I explained that it’s not *her* file; it belongs to Google. So we had to transfer it to one of her Works documents so she could do whatever she wanted with it. She intends to delete things like the subtopics. Now, before moving on, we’re going to practice reducing and enlarging windows and the copying and pasting in ‘editing.’ Barbara was trying to write it down with notes and I suggest that we do a little drill on these tasks.

Moving on to the Works document, we’re again trying to figure out how to enlarge the font. ‘Windows’ button and ‘plus’ doesn’t do anything so we go to ‘help.’ ‘Help’ gives us an option to choose the way the font looks in Works. And now we’re going to select it and we’re going to click ‘font’ and we’re going to select the font size. OK, but now I remind Barbara that we first have to ‘highlight’ the text.

At 2 o’clock Barbara’s eyes were burning and she was tiring and we agreed that she should take a nap. While Barbara slept, I visited with another resident in A.L, Samuel Dunlop. About an hour later, Barbara and I resumed our places in front of her computer. [Narrating once again for Barbara and into the recorder.]

Back in the search results for ‘trivia,’ I point out to Barbara that Google has millions of possibilities in any search and that she’s not stuck with the first or second one. I show her that if she scrolls down to the bottom of each Google search results page, she can see numbers to take her to the next page. We look at several pages and find one with a catchy title, ‘Mental Floss.’ She thinks that would make a better title for her document. Once again, I reinforce the fact she cannot alter the website by copying something to it because a web site is something that someone else has created and protected so that no one can alter it. Barbara got a little confused because she named her own document ‘Geography Trivia’ which was also the title of the website she wanted to use so then she thought they were the same thing. This is why she thought she could alter it to suit her purposes. So we have clarified that. We back up a bit and once again practice making the document small and large.

Within the Google search results page, Barbara had not noticed the search box at the top of the page, just as she had not noticed the search box at the top right corner of her browser screen. She was also not familiar with how to go back through previous search results by using the arrow at the top left-hand corner of the screen. So we practiced that a couple of times. But, when she was in her Works file and wanted to toggle back and forth between it and the Google page, she got confused. She tried to use the ‘go back’ arrow she had just learned for a Google search to go back and forth between the two windows. She had forgotten to use the boxes between the X and the hyphen at the top of her Windows screen. So there’re a lot of confusing things here all mashed in together, all in little places at the top of the screen. For example, there are the double boxes for changing the size of the window, there is the Google search box right under that, there are the arrows on the extreme left side to ‘go back’ when you’re online. And then Google has a window here – at least in this version of Explorer—that has the title of the site that you’re on.

When I showed Barbara how to do a search history, we ran into confusion about drop down menus. She wanted to know why she had to keep holding her mouse down and why there was sometimes a drop down menu and other times not. [Other than saying, ‘that’s the way it is,’ I felt it was beyond me to tackle this question just then.] Although Barbara used to use the top bar menus of ‘file, format, insert, tools, view, edit’ et cetera, she no longer does. Instead, she relies on just the shortcuts of C, V, and X. However, today we have disabused her of the idea that X and C are the same. She recalled that she used to know the top menus when her screen looked different, pre-Vista. We are not sure whether she ever had ‘Word,’ rather than ‘Works’ in her previous computers and if the two programs have the same top bar menus. So we have finally managed to copy and paste some sections of the Google web site into Barbara’s Works file where she is confident she can reconfigure it to her satisfaction.

Now we find another source of confusion. Down at the very bottom of the screen there is the title of her document, which still is 'geography trivia.' And right next to it is the title of the Google site that we are on, with the same name. Barbara wonders what she should be doing with those. So, there's a whole lot of information on the periphery of the screen that you're working on that can be mind boggling when you haven't done it enough. I suggest that we rename Barbara's file to clear up this confusion. Now we want to be able to see the two windows side-by-side: the Google search results window and her Works document file. So we re-sized them. I don't know if it's always been the case in a PC that you can only resize a window when it's in the 'single box' rather than the 'double box' but that seems to be the way it is on Barbara's computer. And if you don't have a fairly large-sized monitor you can't get the boxes open big enough to be useful if you don't know what's going on. Barbara's flat screen is eleven or twelve inches. Incidentally, the one feature on her screen that she is enthused about is the clock and calendar on the right-hand side. ['Yes!' Barbara exclaimed.]

We stopped after nearly two more hours of detailed exploring so that Barbara could go to dinner. She asked me to join her for Bingo later that evening. For thirty minutes, I played at one of the small tables clustered around the recreation room. It wasn't as easy as I had recalled from playing many years earlier, since there were now smaller card numbers with windows that could be covered by means of a small sliding lever. The reward for a completed and verified card was 25 cents and Barbara was pleased to tell me that she had won (possibly in a year and a half) \$35.

Day Two. Barbara wanted to show me some issues with her e-mail program. Since she was waiting for an aide to arrive to help her bathe, she didn't want to get into anything "too complicated."

NL: So your stroke affected your left side. Can you use your hand on that side at all?

Barbara: Mmm Hmm, but not as a typist.

NL: Just pecking, hitting the keys. So that slows things down.

Barbara: I want you to see the—[notification] . . . from my sister about her husband. This Caring Bridge thing as regarded to—all their friends can write in and also find out his condition, where they are. . . . It's a national thing.

NL: So you then submit the information to this outfit called 'Caring Bridge.'

Barbara: This is why I haven't gone . . . . [T]here should be some place that I can get the message. Here we are.

NL: So you go under 'message' and then 'new' and you get 'new message' if there were a new message. But it looks like—oh you're going to send a message.

Barbara: No, I'm supposed to be getting theirs. See, I get all this business mixed up.

NL: So if it's blank I guess that means there isn't a message.

Barbara was getting frustrated at this point, uncertain how to proceed. She started clicking the mouse here and there without much attention to where the cursor was located. I suggested that we step back for a minute and gather our thoughts.

NL: Ok, so don't do anything yet. Just think about it a minute. What is it that you want to do now?

Barbara: I wanted to show you how it's set up . . . They probably went out walking in the woods the other day and I figured there'd be a picture—.

NL: Oh, so this is like community mail. And it's sponsored by Comcast, 'Notification for [her son in law's name].'

Barbara: I don't know. I think it's just a national thing that somebody set up. They've got a line of responses. Anyway, we'll see that later.

I recommended to Barbara that she not click randomly around her screen but try to see where it might be appropriate.

Our session stopped when the aide arrived to help Barbara bathe. Barbara introduced us and later I could hear her telling the aide her version of how we met, emphasizing the university connection between her son and me. The aide agreed with Barbara that that was "something." After her bath, Barbara was ready for another round of computing since she had searched in vain the previous evening for the file containing her autobiography that I had requested. Together, we tried the 'search and find' function using variations of probable document titles, including ones with her name, the project name, A.L. and so on. But we were unsuccessful. Before we could continue, Barbara realized that it was time for another scheduled fitness session and I accompanied her to that. While walking in her measured pace down the hall to the elevator, Barbara told me that she had had several falls in her room since she had moved into Assisted Living. On one occasion, the nurse did not respond to her call for about thirty-five minutes because, she had said, she was distributing medications to the residents. As was usually the case, Barbara's tone was matter of fact rather than one of anger or complaint even though I expressed considerable concern. I wondered if she had told this to any of her children and whether they had addressed this with the staff. Downstairs in the Day Room, a professional fitness instructor modeled for our small group of seven a series of chair exercises which included stretching and lifting weights. As in all things, Barbara paid close attention to the leader following her instructions earnestly. Barbara's range of physical activity was sharply reduced and she therefore had committed herself to doing everything within her ability that was provided for her in her immediate living environment.

Our treat for that evening was a trip to a nearby town to our favorite restaurant, Lake Lookout. After our meal she remarked that it was "was very uplifting to be in the conversation and to get out to see what I haven't seen for awhile." She also said (approximately) that the

experience was very nice because it took her to another world, reminding her of how small the Park world was. Once back in her room, Barbara and I planned the next day's activities as her favorite Scrabble partner, Mazna, arrived; they had been playing Scrabble together on Wednesday evenings for at least five to six years. Barbara's never-ceasing Scrabble play was another manifestation of her ongoing determination to stay on top of her game of mental well-being just as her continued use of I-C technologies was.

Day Three. With some excitement, Barbara told me as soon as I arrived that she had found her biography document. She finally realized that since she hadn't initially intended it to be anything for Assisted Living, she had placed it in a folder named, "family." She printed out a copy for me. Our last challenge, then, was to figure out how to move the biography from the family folder and into the "Assisted Living" folder along with the other biographies she was writing. I thought that the simplest means for Barbara would be dragging and dropping between the two folders. When that didn't work, we tried a number of maneuvers with the right-click mouse menu, for example. At last, we stumbled on the method of dragging her document onto the desktop first, then opening the second folder and dragging it into that. Barbara was pleased, explaining that she'd never had any luck with the dragging technique. As I watched her weakened hands struggle to simultaneously hold down the mouse button, position the cursor in the exact spot and move the mouse while continuing to press it down I could appreciate the challenge of this seemingly simple task.

We took a break from computing and I broached the delicate issue of senile individuals and the qualifications for Assisted Living residency. I shared with Barbara one man's (Laslo Unterweg, whom she knew from the Computer Club) concerns about his future in the Park and about how he was denied a place in Assisted Living after an interview with the director of the facility. She told me that a major criterion for residence in the A.L. was that people had to be able to get in and out of the building by themselves.

NL: Otherwise they go right to the Nursing Care Center? Well, he [i.e. Laslo] can get in and out by himself. He goes around. He can cook for himself. But his vision is very limited, as is Samuel Dunlop's.

Barbara: But when Dunlop came here, he wasn't that way. Once he's here and has adapted or—he's OK.

NL: I didn't know that. I thought that Assisted Living was just exactly for that purpose—where the person can't see or hear well enough but they're not mentally incompetent. They just need assistance getting—

Barbara: The woman with dark glasses, she's almost legally blind. But she can do things like wrap papers at the Thrift Shop and she goes to church. She does her own clothing, her dressing.

NL: Well he does all that. He can walk through his apartment and open the door and show me around. I mean he's not that blind—he's not as blind as Samuel. And I don't know that he wanted to come right away or what her decision was based on. Whether she thought he wasn't capable. But that's—so his pessimistic view is that they'll kick him out of the whole Park.

Barbara reflected on the decision she had had to make to enter Assisted Living slightly more than a year earlier. She had been very reluctant to give up her cottage and independent life.

Barbara: That gal (the director of A.L.) you were talking about. . . . She helped me get here. She helped me decide and she said, 'if you don't do it now, you'll wait 'til further— [i.e. deterioration].' And with the kids here, I decided. But she is a very, very caring person. Very—what's the word?

NL: Well, so I think that from what you say he is a candidate for here. I don't think he wants to lose his—I think he's like you, he doesn't want to give up yet—and yet it'll be too late.

Barbara: It's exactly what's gonna' happen.

NL: But she said, according to him, that he wasn't a candidate. I don't know if she meant it's too late or it's too soon.

Barbara: I'd say it's too late.

NL: Although if you think—and Samuel is really angry about the people who are mentally incompetent who are here—[Laslo] is totally mentally competent. So, isn't that ironic that they can be here and he can't just because his vision is very bad? And he's otherwise quite functional?

Barbara: But how would he fit in? He doesn't do anything with anybody.

NL: Ah ha. But the people who are mentally incompetent can't do anything with anybody successfully either.

Barbara: But they're not a problem as far as inability to live here.

NL: Well Samuel was giving an example of how they have a coffee group after lunch and a couple of women have interfered because they talk off topic and they just blabber . . . and they are incoherent and so it kind of ruins their little coffee klatch. And so he feels that they're interrupting the quality of his life.

Barbara: I don't agree with him on that. They were that way at first. And I think they're fitting in, in a sense, to their ability. They want to talk and sometimes they have the right answer and sometimes they don't.

NL: You objected to 'these people that don't know where their room is.'

Barbara: But they are not harming anybody.

NL: [Laslo] wouldn't harm anybody . . . He just wouldn't smile all the time. OK, so he can rest assured, however, that he will at least go to the Nursing Care Center. They have to put him somewhere don't they?

Barbara: They have to put him in the Nursing Care Center if— when he is no longer able to take care of himself. I had a friend in Seawell Place [who] fell and they put her in the Nursing Care Center. And she wanted to go back; she said she could take care of herself. Her 'caring friend' wasn't sure, her family were not sure that she could take care of herself. She said she could. They never let her try again. She just gave up. She said, 'if you want me to get up, get me up.'

For a change of pace I turned our attention to politics and our discussion revealed the breadth of Barbara's interests and her efforts to stay engaged with current events (as did her exploration of computer-related technology). Since it was the week before the election of a president the subject of voting came up readily in all my conversations with Park residents. Barbara told me that the Park was designated an official polling place (Sturgis told me that local Republicans, realizing the strong Republican party membership among residents had arranged that), that voting booths were set up in the Assembly Building for every election and that it was therefore easy for residents to turn out in large numbers (which they often did) to vote. She and I discussed the merits of various candidates and Barbara was not as interested as I about the subject of female candidates unless I meant the *vice president* because she had things to say about that! I was a little surprised that Barbara had boiled her objections to the candidate down to a single issue. This was what bothered her,

Barbara: Alaska's prime concern is that everybody has their gun.

NL: That was it? That was enough for you? Regardless of all the other problems, it was the gun thing?

Barbara: Well it's prime in my book.

I had momentarily forgotten that Barbara was a pacifist and, by extension, anti weapons. Barbara also confided that although it took many months of discussion, she had turned Sturgis away from Republican candidates in favor of the leading Democratic candidate. I realized that given Sturgis' pronouncement about the rightness of the "Sturgis Way" in all things, that hers was a noteworthy feat of persuasion.

At the end of our last shared meal in the Dining Hall we had one more sit-down at her computer where I hoped to inspire Barbara to reflect on its value for her.

NL: My gosh if you didn't have your computer—

Barbara: I said this to Sturge the other day—when I was talking about forgetting the whole thing [i.e. computing]— he said 'you're not even talking straight.'

NL: What is your computer for you?

Barbara: I don't want to say my life. But it is actually. What I can do when I want something to do. It's something that I feel like I'm using it in a constructive way. And also it's keeping me moving physically and mentally.

NL: Physically and mentally. It *is* your life in a way.

Barbara: Really! I hope I can keep up what you showed me because those were all new things.

NL: E-mail or phone me and I'll talk you through it.

Barbara: I might. . . . Because see, Sturge has never gotten into that kind of thing with me—those little dots and all that.

NL: Yeah there are tons of little arrows here and here and here [pointing to her screen]. So many things to look at. It's just too much.

Barbara: Mmm hmm and I lose something and I don't know where to look for what I did.

Not wanting to miss an opportunity to reinforce some of my previous days' advice, I tried to refresh Barbara's memory on what we had been practicing.

NL: So what's the most important thing I told you about today, to remember?

Barbara: Slow—

N: Slow down and don't click until—

Barbara: But if I don't know before I go out of it I may not know anymore if I wait.

NL: Don't click until you see where the arrow is.

Barbara: Did you write that down?

NL: Until you see, move the mouse around and pay attention to where it is before you do any clicking. [she writes it down] It could be an arrow, it could be a hand, it could be an hourglass, it can be anything. But wait until you see where it's pointing. That is critical. Because you like a lot of beginners, want something to happen—

Barbara: *Now*.

NL: So you just start clicking: click, click, click. And then something will happen but bad things happen also. So you can't be impatient. You have to slow down and see where you're pointing to before you do any clicking. That's so important. So, instead of 'look before you leap,' it's 'look before you click.'

Barbara and I laughed together over my not very original slogan and—ultimately—over all the hours of our lives that were tangled up in it. I folded some paper into a sign and wrote the words, "Look before you click" on it and assured her that I would create something more permanent. She placed it above her keyboard.

**Epilogue:** I was curious about what type of communication Barbara would choose to keep me updated on her life—e-mail on her own, e-mail through Sturgis, postal mail or phone calls? Two weeks after my departure from the Park, Barbara sent me a postal letter in which she reported that she was "getting more exercise and feeling better." In early November, she attended the Holiday Bazaar, which reportedly raised approximately \$12,000 for the Nursing Care Center. Her \$5 raffle ticket won her a "TV, DVD" about which she said, "Nice. Now I need to learn where [whether] there is anything worth listening to."

After my return to Illinois, I sent Barbara a box of goodies that also included a few computer-related items—photocopied pages from a *Dummies* series book on senior computing and from a book on the Vista OS and a laminated piece of pink paper with the words, “Look Before You Click!” A few weeks later, in mid December, Barbara wrote a postal letter to thank me for the “goodies” and the “clever device” of the pink sign. She told me about the various members coming and going for holiday visits and reported, “I am still having e-mail trouble of out mail—with message saying ‘can’t be mailed.’ I am discussed [i.e. disgusted]. After Christmas activities I will resume little bios of [Assisted Living] people.”

In January, Barbara was having difficulties not only with e-mail but also with keeping track of letters she typed via her computer. She explained in a postal letter: “Woe is me! I was sssso tickled with your letter that I wrote an immediate reply. It wasn’t four pages like yours, but wasn’t hello-bye! I don’t know what I did, but lost it. I tried and then Sturge tried. No luck. So here I go again.” After more family news, Barbara returned to computer laments. “Can’t I get computer help, you ask? Yes, but it [i.e. her computer problem] has changed several times. Today was another while Sturge was here !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” She concluded, “I love your pink computer caution—and your newsy letter!”

In a March, 09, letter, Barbara reported that the Park had introduced Wii into some of the residence halls in the Park and that Sturgis was very excited about it. After she and Sturgis talked with the director of Assisted Living, the residents were given a game on a trial basis and decided to order one. Barbara said it was “not as easy as they had expected.” She reported that her left leg had given way twice, dropping her to the ground; she was bruised but undaunted and “keeping at therapy.” And then some good computer-related news: “Finally I have learned how to save Bios and Word Game, both of which I use every week, 3 half days on bio. I have so far made 36 bios—and have a surprising lot of compliments. I have not finished all, and there [are] a lot of new residents.” All was not trouble free, however, as Barbara related. “I get computer things like ‘Webpage has expired—out of date.’ . . . My worst problem on the computer is Comcast keeps trying to correct stuff, but it seems to be getting better.”

Towards the end of May, Barbara apparently failed in her attempt to send me an e-mail. I received her message through Sturgis’ connection to her computer. On May 22<sup>nd</sup> he e-mailed me: “Barbara was having trouble sending you this letter so I volunteered to send it from my computer. Please let both of us know if you get it ok. Thanks, Sturge.” Barbara wrote,



I still have lots of computer things happen and when Sturge is available, he is a great help. The computer revamp seems to be over, but I can forget a heck of a lot. The one thing I have in hand is the little biographies I have been working on about the Assisted Living residents to have one a week for our little newspaper. I have done 45 and am nearing the end.

I am having therapy again to correct some things that need corrected. I guess for my age I'm doing OK. At our Senior Sports Week opening I was chosen to light the torch that burns all week (for my plucking [i.e., plucky] energy). . . . My weekly Scrabble friend for several years, Mazna, considerably younger, had a stroke and died—to everyone's dismay and sorrow. Coming along with your writing? . . . It was good to hear from you indirectly. Barbara.

I sent a reply via Sturgis' e-mail since Barbara was obviously finding his filtering of her mail easier to manage than logging onto her own mail system. And on June twelfth, she sent her next message to me in the same way, through Sturgis (“Hi, Barbara sent this to me so I'm forwarding it to you.”) She wrote about an impending visit by some relatives and of the slowdown of her computer use,

Yes, I got your letter. Hurrah. Not much more to write about. I'm spending a lot of time on therapy and doctors. . . . Less time on the computer partly because of eyes and I have completed the bios of the residents here for the moment. Work hard. . . . Love, Barbara

In August, I received another Sturgis mediated e-mail from Barbara,

My computer is still my life line, though I would be at a loss without Sturgis—I get in a loss [i.e., lot] of unexplained messes. I have interviewed and written 50 Assisted Living residents' little biographies. That's all who have any memory. Any more will be new residents. My other project is 1 or 2 weekly Trivias... for a little group, 10-12 led by our aide. Sec'y Dora is emphasising [sic], encouraging exercising. My “Look before you Click!” reminds of you daily. Love... B.

Four months later, Barbara computer-typed two letters (Sept. & Oct., 2009) to let me know that she was doing well and was back at her computer. Her first mail reported on the recent visit of all of her children to celebrate her 95<sup>th</sup> birthday and on the increase of her completed “bios” to fifty-five. Her body and her computer use were again compromised.

I have had some eye trouble as well as off again on again computer trouble. I don't know what I'd do without Sturge. He called Comcast again today and is double checking this evening. Since I started this [letter], Sturge has tackled Vista and hopes [he] got some progress [and] . . . a bit of help.

In her next mail Barbara provided a lengthier update on her activities.

Thanks for the nice card and letter. Congratulations on your pushing on!! I'm sure my longevity is due to keeping plugging away. We have, for instance, an exercise program 3 times a week- excellent leaders from the Fitness leaders in the Assembly Building. Yes, my computer problems is due to the Vista-Computer. . . . My bios are not ‘completed.’ Three new ones will soon be settled and ready to tell their story. I am lucky to have this to look forward to. [She describes the Park-sponsored activities, ‘some better than others’ and continues with hers.] Scrabble—every Wed. with 3 others and a single just now and again. My ability is not what it was. Yes, I still contribute trivia challenges weekly. Google has trivia by the endless numbers, but it's hard to get them not too difficult [i.e. find easy ones] . . . Elizabeth is active as ever . . . ; she and Spencer are a great match and don't miss much. . . . The tree outside my window is coming in blossom- pale pink. . . . Time for Bingo. I'm doing fairly well. . . . It surely was good to hear from you. Love, Barbara.

**Insights:** Once again, Barbara was ahead of the computing curve, especially in the Park, when she brought her machine into Assisted Living. She was the fourth person to do so and although dozens of residents had moved in after her, no one else followed suit nor was it very likely that many would. Her inclusion of the space-taking desk and hardware in a very modest amount of square footage was a visible manifestation of her dedication to this aspect of her life. After previously declining to see it as such, Barbara finally acknowledged that her computer “kept her moving physically and mentally” and as such was of great value in and for her life. And, again, she mentioned that her computer gave her something to do with her time. By 2008, she also pointed to a major value of her computer as a “creative outlet.” This was of great importance in Barbara’s computing life. She took pride in her computer-generated artifacts such as her written compositions and her graphically rich greeting cards, posters and a multi-page newsletter. Her use of the Internet was not exploration per se; it was, rather, targeted searching to advance her creative projects and/or to find material to contribute to her shared activities such as the trivia questions for her reading group. With many acts of creation, much of the joy comes with sharing the product with others. When Barbara wrote to me (in June of ‘09) that her computer interest had waned once she had completed her biographies of the A.L. residents, I thought of her former neighbor, Will Mahler. It is possible that Will’s diminishing computer use might have been coincident with the cessation (caused by others) of his astronomy column. His column as well as Barbara’s Assisted Living biographies were published and circulated for their peers to enjoy and admire. This is surely a powerful stimulus to sustain the effort required to maintain computer literacy. It is also a reminder of some of the less mundane ways (contrasted with filling out insurance and medical forms, for example) in which computers were being used in the Park. And, fortunately, since more new people were moving into A.L. by the fall of 2009, Barbara was back at her computer creating more bios of them.

Throughout my observations and reports of Barbara’s computer use, a most persistent issue about which she complained was the poor functioning of her e-mail server. For many years, she lacked a robust connection for e-mail with the free program, JUNO, and, eventually, for the Internet, a factor which clearly discouraged her use of the latter. And this problem was not, in the Park, limited to Barbara. A scholar of I-C technologies commented on the ramifications of this aspect of connectivity,

“[B]eing on the Internet” varies tremendously depending on the kind of network connection one has. Those with faster connections can gather and transmit more information and . . . do more with their computers. As information becomes increasingly accessible for some but not all citizens, network speed becomes an index of power in society. (Bruce 1998, 275)

Although Barbara was, by 2008, better connected through AOL and/or Comcast, she was then confronted with the challenge of having to learn another system that seemed to be beyond her control and which made her dependent on Sturgis for help (and it was he who had promoted it). As she wrote in a 2009 letter, her then “worst problem on the computer [was that] Comcast [kept] trying to correct stuff.” As a very personal computing application, it is easy to understand why this issue has been her constant concern. Lacking e-mail is isolating. Having to go through an intermediary (as she sometimes did with Sturgis’s access to her desktop) to communicate was obviously compromising. Barbara noted this in one of the e-mail replies I sent via Sturgis when she said that she was hearing from me “indirectly.” This process, while convenient for her, undermined her values of independence and privacy of thought. Without reliable (and private) e-mail she was cut off from her virtual community. Not only was she being distanced from the process of using her computer, she was being isolated from an important social network. One of Barbara’s solutions for this dilemma was to resort to the familiar communication technology of letter writing via the post office, whether by hand or computer assisted.

It is sometimes the case that when we ask a person for help with a computer glitch subtle changes are made by the helper that rearrange the familiar landscape of our computer. Surely, the headache of having someone ‘mess with’ one’s computer is compounded when they have access to it remotely. Barbara had no idea what Sturgis might have done with her computer when she asked him for help and he tinkered with her desktop. And how could he communicate it to her by telephone with their mutual hearing losses? As Sturgis told me, he “didn’t like the details of computing—all the colons and dashes.” So it’s understandable that he did not help her with all the “dots” of computing, as Barbara put it. It takes time and patience to sit down next to someone and observe exactly what she can/can’t do. Likewise, Sturgis was not inclined, nor did he think it helpful (I surmise) to try to explain to Barbara how he fixed each of her problems. Thus, Barbara’s relationship with her computer was becoming ever more distant.

The subject of cognitive abilities—who had them and who was losing them—was very much on Barbara’s mind in 2008 for two reasons. She was well aware of her own lapses and she was surrounded as never before by individuals in varying states of notable cognitive decline. She

used two metaphors to describe herself and others, “loss” and “journey.” Her acquaintances were “losing it,” (presumably their minds and, eventually, their independence) and/or she and they were “on their way,” (presumably toward the same end as those losing it—to the living death of total senility and the eventual cessation of life). Barbara could clearly discern the ways in which she had declined in the previous two years and was the first to admit that her memory was full of gaps (on the Park history of the construction and use of lowered keyboard shelves, for instance). There were increasing numbers of words that she couldn’t bring to mind (“cancer, disk, screen, disgusted, empathy,” the names of the A.L. director and secretary are examples) or words that she substituted for one another and her uncharacteristic non sequiturs. There were word mix-ups, trailing thoughts and abrupt changes of topic. Sometimes she was able to devise clever substitutions such as “little wheels” for “disks.”

As Neva Evans, her fellow committee member, noted in our conversation about the challenges of aging, just keeping “body and soul” together eats up a lot of time. Getting from point A to B was slow going for Barbara; on some days it seemed like all she did was move from one meal to the next, once the travel time and the careful chewing/swallowing were factored in. Bathing, dressing and grooming were time consuming, to say nothing of dealing with health care providers. Barbara also had to devote time to physical therapy for her post stroke complications. Given these constraints, it’s amazing that she was able to accomplish all that she did. Notwithstanding multiple health crises including two strokes, continuing falls, and sufficient weakness to require help with bathing, she willed herself to remain active. Her refusal to dwell on her physical problems was encapsulated in her reply when asked by passers by how she was doing. “Getting around” or “getting along” were her invariable responses. Whether using computing technology or playing Bingo, the same driving force underlay all her actions—to keep fit, keep going, keep up, stay alive. All the activities that I shared with her fed into and reinforced each other.

Barbara’s choice of a room on the top floor at the far end of the hallway might be interpreted as anti-social or indicative of a lack of social engagement. It was in marked contrast, for example, to the location of Samuel Dunlop’s room which was immediately adjacent to the A.L. lobby, a major hub of social activity. But in Barbara’s case her room choice evidenced her need for autonomy in a calm haven rather than a desire to repel human interaction. In fact, her blend of quiet manner, informed intelligence, independence of thought, and service to others was

what drew people to Barbara and fostered her social engagement. And it was the basis of her powers of persuasion. In 2008, these were manifested in the arena of a national presidential election wherein she apparently changed some peoples' thinking. Always interested in and keen to talk about American politics and world events Barbara exerted her knowledge-based influence upon her friends and acquaintances. Barbara said that Sturgis "used to be a very determined Republican" (since he was determined in everything he did). But, obviously, Sturgis had become a determined Obama supporter and she attributed that to the many talks they had had during their lengthy acquaintanceship. She shaped the thinking of her acquaintance, Myrtle Likert, while exercising at her side in the Fitness room. When mentioning Elizabeth's probable Republican leanings, Barbara expressed the hope that Elizabeth's new companion, Spencer, was "working on her" with regard to her political allegiance. Among my Park acquaintances, Barbara was the most actively committed to remaining informed about national affairs and to trying to keep her fellow residents informed.

Community activism was at the core of Barbara's being and she did not necessarily choose her friends and acquaintances based on shared political or social ideologies. Rather, she seemed to evaluate people by virtue of their acts and what she considered to be good works. She had little use for individuals who did not contribute to the common good and to the welfare of their co-habitants. In the Park, this impulse was most readily discernible in the realm of volunteering. Thus, her good friends Elizabeth Dickerson and Sturgis were members of a different political party but they were also heavy-duty volunteers which made them "OK" in her book. On the other hand, Barbara was at one time critical of Neva Evans when she was heavily involved with her new Park beau, Tally, and when, in Barbara's view, her contributions to the Park were minimal. Later, in the wake of Tally's death, Neva and Barbara achieved a rapprochement through their shared committee membership. And it was his total lack (to her eye) of service to others or involvement in Park affairs that was the cause of Barbara's quiet hostility towards Laslo Unterweg and her strong reluctance to view him as a suitable candidate for her residence facility (and her feelings were apparently shared by its administrators).

**General Discussion:** Computer use for older folks can at various times be likened to salmon running upstream. If one were to chart Barbara's computer progress over the years it would yield a zigzag-shaped path. In the fall of 2008, many of her basic computer skills were considerably less than six to eight years earlier. Learning/memory issues played a role but there

were other factors that are of equal consequence. Barbara's skills were set back each time she was confronted with a traumatic event, either in the form of a health crisis (strokes, surgeries, serious illnesses and hospitalizations) or natural disasters like storms that destroyed her machine. Illnesses resulted in loss of practice with the process of computing. With regard to the issue of emotional assaults that impacted Barbara's functioning, we should consider the then recent trauma in Barbara's life of the sudden loss of her Scrabble partner, Mazna. The probable consequences of Mazna's death were several for Barbara: (1) she lost an important and reliable component of her social network; (2) without Mazna, Barbara's Scrabble playing was seriously disrupted so (3) she consequently lost, however temporarily, an important source of brain stimulation; and (4) she had to confront the painful reality of her own fragile health since Mazna was much younger than Barbara and yet suffered a fatal stroke. Damaged machines resulted in replacement machines which were never identical to the old ones. Barbara had to deal with many changes in e-mail programs and providers. And, finally, the event that proved to be her undoing was the change in PC operating systems from XP to VISTA. Initially, she lacked guidance regarding the two fixes of de/reinstalling the programs and/or tweaking VISTA to make it resemble XP. As she referenced in one of her letters to me, the "revamping" (i.e., changing the interface to resemble XP) with which her informal computer tutor, Sturgis, had been helping her for more than a year, was done. But it was a little too late for her to realize a sizeable benefit. Thus, technology, itself, confounded all her efforts by evolving.

As our work on her computer illustrates, Barbara had apparently forgotten some basic functions and some of them were ones we had practiced together in previous years: copy/paste, drag/drop; right/left mouse click options; drop down menus; differing box functions and so on. On the other hand, Internet functions were newer to her since she had for years lacked a stable connection to it. So her inability to make her way through its treacherous waters was comprehensible. There are many simultaneous levels to keep in mind in order to compute, such as the visible screen contents versus the underlying functions. 'Importing' the Internet through a browser adds another level onto the screen and computer. Few experienced computer users appreciate the novel appearance and feel of the Internet for the inexperienced; it has its own navigational protocols and the moving through time and space with "all its little arrows" can be confusing. Its rules dictating that its pages are not generally manipulate-able compared with word-processed documents, for example, elude the new arrivals to its shores. Barbara tried

repeatedly to do things *to* Internet pages or files and had little understanding of the principles of “write-able” versus “readable.” She just wanted to somehow grab its contents for her project. What were some possible reasons for Barbara’s inability to manage the basic functions she once knew?

- She forgot previous knowledge.
- She had never acquired this knowledge, never encoded it (committed it to long term memory).
- Her working memory was increasingly inadequate.
- She had poor sensory functions (touch and eyesight) to manage the tasks.
- She had never received the ideal instruction for mastering “all the little dots.”

Although Sturgis had spelled it out—he hated the detailed precision that computers demanded—the other three men (Al Swenson and Don McDonald, Computer Club co-leaders, and Cody Peabody, Park-sanctioned computer instructor) who served as primary computer gurus for the Park residents were likewise impatient ‘teachers’ in the confines of one-to-one settings. Firstly, they were overwhelmed with the numbers and needs of novice computer users; secondly, they were not highly or recently trained instructors; and thirdly they were not temperamentally suited for micro level computer instruction. All of the residents whom I helped—including three of the men—thanked me for not taking over their keyboards as other helpers had done. They knew that they could not effectively learn through observation alone. Furthermore, very few individuals stated that any of the school-sponsored computer classes they took were useful. They could not, as Barbara spelled out, bridge the gap between the classroom and home use. It is a fair conclusion that a major reason for the self-reported failures of those in my study was lack of adequate—not to mention ideal—instruction on the intricacies of how to use a computer.

Barbara was a textbook example of what to do to stave off cognitive decline. She read widely, she exercised regularly, she took part in stimulating discussions, and she played word games. In fact, no form of contest was beneath Barbara’s competitive dignity; she strove to win even if the game was Bingo or tossing a sponge ball into a basket at three feet. As the years went on, Barbara was more and more contesting with ‘nature’ for her mind and body. And it seemed as though it was her competitive spirit that kept her in that game. By virtue of her continuing diligence and hard work on keeping mind and body fit, Barbara Howard can serve as an exemplar for the research work of the scientists who hypothesize that aging individuals can

increase their cognitive fitness through an engaged lifestyle and conscious choices (Stine-Morrow et al. 2008). And there is another important element in the endeavor to remain healthy into very old age—one's attitude and outlook on life. In every instance, Barbara made the best of what was presented to her. If A.L. was not heaven, she nevertheless needed it and so she found ways to adapt which was to live in the quietest corner of a busy facility away from the madding crowd (a phrase which had more than a grain of poetic truth). If the Vista OS was a torment sent by a manufacturing Devil, she would keep after Sturgis to either learn the system and help her understand it or have him take over her computer. If she could no longer remember the language of crossword puzzles, she would resort to Bingo for stimulation. However she acquired the ability, Barbara never let things get her down—for long.

Another element involved with healthy aging is intimacy. Achieving this in later years is especially challenging in the face of the drastic imbalance of male/female longevity. In relation to this issue, might there be a hidden benefit of being computer literate—such as romance? When I visited with Barbara in 2005, she told me that one of her computer uses was typing the letters of a widower friend, Spencer, who had no interest in using his own computer. In exchange, he took her out to dinner. I did not enquire further into the nature of their relationship, assuming that if there were more to it, Barbara would have told me. But then, three years later, in 2008, the topic of Spencer came up again. This time, however, Barbara told me that his letters were now being typed by his new companion, (and her best friend), Elizabeth. A brief comment that Barbara made about her friends' relationship contained a hint of bitterness. That remark afforded me a glimpse into an aspect of Barbara's feelings that I hadn't had an occasion to consider before. Had Barbara been more interested in Spencer than she realized (or that she confided to me)? She did, after all, donate her time and effort to serve as his computer amanuensis, writing letters on his behalf. Even if she weren't interested in him romantically, she may have regretted his shift of time and attention to Elizabeth. Not only was there no more dining out in the former foursome, she saw much less of her friend, Elizabeth, who went to all the Park activities exclusively in the company of Spencer. This computer-related drama suggests that romance (and its attendant feelings of jealousy and betrayal) and a yearning for sexual connection or at least intimate companionship continue to be an important factor in surviving and thriving throughout the life cycle.



Writing the biographies of her fellow A.L. residents was deeply therapeutic for Barbara giving her a worthy goal and a means to achieve it. For some of the residents she interviewed it may have been a salutary experience as well. The concepts of “reminiscence therapy” and “life review” (see books by Robert N. Butler from the 1960s onward) have been in play for at least five decades and projects to explore these ideas in retirement communities have waxed and waned. In the “Recall Project” for British “groups of old people,” nurses, social workers and occupational therapists were trained in the use of reminiscence and reported “remarkable effects” (Thompson 1988, 186). Another researcher in the same time period and country pointed out that in a group of fifty individuals, only about twenty were happy to reminisce; others were disinclined to recall their pasts due either to being too busy or too depressed by the prospect (Coleman 1986). As Barbara found out, not all of the Assisted Living residents “took to it.” To my knowledge, there were no such formal reminiscence projects underway in the Park during the years of my study, and I speculate that the rationale would have been staff shortages. Barbara’s informal project was one of peer-elicited (but not mutually shared) memories and might be an unusual approach. It is possible that some therapists could postulate harm for both parties if the process were to evoke negative emotions. On the other hand, Barbara’s two-paragraph introductions of newly arrived as well as established residents, offered at least three possible benefits to the resident population—public recognition, their discovery of mutual interests or backgrounds, and the forging of social connecting. It could be one more way for the computer users in the Park to discover one another.

In my visit to the Park in 2008, I became more aware of the therapeutic nature of games not only for physical fitness but also for their cognitive benefit, as well. As Americans do in general, Park residents enjoyed playing games of all kinds and many did so with the appreciation of their serious purpose. The introduction (in the spring of 2009) of Wii into Flamingo Park was somewhat overdue, another indication of the conservative thinking of Park administrators regarding new technologies. On YouTube one can find videos showing the use of Wii and the formation of leagues among retirement communities that began several years ago. It is a useful form of exercise but may be too vigorous for those who are incapable of normal exercise routines. For those who were able to manage the body movements required in Wii, there were other Park outlets that might better satisfy their need for exercise. It remains to be seen if Wii captivates Park residents as it has done in other retirement communities.

Although Bingo (with or without the gambling aspect) hardly seems to warrant the label of therapeutic game, I came to appreciate its benefits when I played at it briefly while with Barbara. I found that it actually required a fair amount of concentrated hand/eye coordination. Focused attention is required in order for players to hear, perceive and then find on their cards the numbers that are called out rather rapidly. It was apparent from the strain on my own eyesight that spotting the numbers would be a challenge for many older people with failing vision. Thus, I am now aware of the Bingo health benefits, however unsung they may be, for the kind of coordination required in the use of I-C technologies as well. Still, I would wager that even \$ .25 served as a better motivator to play than claims of therapy. Watching Barbara play Bingo was somewhat surreal because I had seen her many times serving as a Bingo game Volunteer who assisted residents in the Nursing Care Center. Barbara's days of volunteering were now coming full circle as she was more and more the recipient of such help.

Barbara's enthusiasm for the game of Scrabble was a constant over the twelve years I knew her. At one time, she played it online both with real partners and against a computer program. I didn't at that time perceive it as a technology (as it surely is), but I recognized its benefits for mental exercising. Barbara's oldest daughter attempted to encapsulate her mother's traits on a Scrabble board. Within the constraints of available letters, she chose these words to describe Barbara's personality: "determined, organized, cautious, thoughtful, energetic, lib, fix, fab, nap, lean, quality, spell, reader, voter, boss, wise, active." These all jibe with my impressions of Barbara, past and present, which suggested how deeply central these traits were to her being. That they were spelled out on this game board is fitting because Barbara's love of this word game cannot be overstated. I can only ponder what Scrabble represented to her. I like to view it as a synthesis of Barbara's lifetime of learning and experience that found expression in new ways each time she arranged the letters she drew. To do this, she chose from among the thousands of words she had amassed in her brain over the course of nine decades. And, as the words 'dropped out' of her mind, she continued to search for them even as she added new ones from more recent technologies.

## CHAPTER 5

### A PROFILE IN SOCIABILITY: SAMUEL DUNLOP (AGED 76–89)

Describing Samuel Dunlop in my field notes, I observed:

He is of average height and build, with thinning and graying hair; his appearance is unremarkable until he speaks. His voice is strong and deep, befitting a pastor, and his speech has a free flowing quality as he drops out various parts of sentences. He is approachable and willing to talk earnestly and at length on any subject.

Rev. Dunlop approached me, in **1996**, before leaving the Computer Club meeting, to express his desire to meet with me and obtain moral support for Internet searching. I went over to his cottage one hot, sunny morning and, after discussing his leaded glass creations and meeting his wife, Myra, we went to Rev. Dunlop's sun porch/den and sat in front of his computer. He told me a little about himself. At age 76, he was a retired pastor of forty years and served as a chaplain for the Park. He was a graduate of a small seminary college in the southeast; both he and his wife were from a mid western state. He mentioned having a daughter who brought him a computer two years ago and "loaded" it for him; his computer had eight megabytes of memory and a board that would accommodate sixteen. His daughter was a programmer for a financial service on the East Coast. His son who worked for an engineering firm constructed or rebuilt computers; he found parts at computer fairs. Rev. Dunlop was using Windows 3.1 but hoped to upgrade to Windows 95 when his son came to visit him over the holidays. He regularly used CD-ROMs. He told me that he was disappointed in *Compton's Encyclopedia* CD-ROM because the information on it was sparse. Rev. Dunlop had a printer but wanted a color ink jet printer which he planned to buy when the price dropped below \$200.

During the previous couple of years, Rev. Dunlop had been using his computer to organize his financial records with the Quicken program. He became interested in computing when he saw an Amway program for computers; he explained its system of multi-leveled, direct selling of cleaning products to me. Apparently, Rev. Dunlop was an Amway salesman sometime in the past. He had not used the SLIN system but had been using CompuServ off and on for the past three years for an Internet connection. He mainly used this connection for e-mail with which he communicated with children and grandchildren two to three times a week. As to other Internet features, Rev. Dunlop had used Netscape a little to explore the Web. When I asked him if he enjoyed it he said, "I know in the back of my mind that it has ten times the capabilities I've

used.” He told me that he obtained news of current events from TV, a local newspaper and the *Reader’s Digest* to which he subscribed. The Reverend hadn’t been in a public library “for years.” He did, however, collect books for the libraries in Flamingo Park’s residential complexes and he wanted to somehow explore libraries with his computer. Reverend Dunlop wanted ready access to facts and information; that was what he had hoped to be able to do with the *Compton’s Encyclopedia*. Another thing he wanted to do with his computer was to make his own greeting cards. He showed me the announcement of his friends’ 50th wedding anniversary that was made by their son on a computer.

As we started to look into Samuel’s computer he said he wanted help using searching functions in Netscape particularly on the topic of “leaded glass.” Samuel occasionally made glass pieces in the Park workshop where there were some tools that augmented his own collection. We tried searching with “stained glass” and found some Web sites. I showed him how to make “bookmarks” of sites he found interesting; he said that his daughter had put some on a list for him but he didn’t know how to do it. He wanted to look through a catalog of products that he found at a Web site and mentioned that he would send for this catalog so he could look at it in his leisure. I suggested that he just print it out and he liked that idea. Don’s wife, Myra, brought some lemonade to us and then joined in our discussion. I asked her if she had used the computer yet. She said that they communicated with their children by e-mail but “he does the writing.” She explained that she had eye problems and wanted to save her eyes for “important things.”

**Insights:** Reverend Dunlop was comfortable with the process of computing. He was convinced that computers and the Internet were powerful tools with a big future and he was ready to embrace any applications that he found useful. He hadn’t quite moved into full exploratory mode preferring to wait for someone to be beside him to show him searching strategies and other useful tips. Thus far, he had only learned how to use an e-mail program but anticipated doing much more. In addition to obtaining information, the Reverend wanted to use his computer for creative purposes.

In **August, 2000**, when I encountered Samuel Dunlop at a Computer Club meeting, I failed to recognize him due to a marked weight gain which I attributed to his double knee surgery and reduction in exercise thereafter. I hadn’t been able to meet with him in 1999 due to these surgeries so we had four years of catching up to do in our **second meeting**. As we sat in his

cottage living room he described his substantial progress. His children and grandchildren continued to live on both coasts and it was his grandson, who was a computer programmer and then a consultant, who facilitated his grandfather's computing. "Oh, he's the one got me started all the way around. He also keeps me going. I've got a nice computer now; . . . every time he comes home, he upgrades it." Samuel had a cable connection that kept him continuously connected to the Internet and he said he felt "sorry" for his friends who had to deal with the less robust connection through "American Online."

The former Rev. Dunlop was still using Quicken to maintain his financial records but he had had no success with tax programs. "I've tried two or three times. I don't know—I'm too dumb." On the other hand, Samuel was excited about his discovery of various CD-ROM genealogy programs and he had been gathering family tree records. "And I've gotten into that pretty deep and I've put in all that I have." He had a brother in the Midwest who was also exploring their family history and they compared notes. Another major use for his computer was typing up sermons. Samuel used an 18-point font to aid his failing eyesight. He had retired seven months earlier from his position of Park chaplain but continued to substitute as needed.

Comparing himself with his daughter's skills in Internet searching, Samuel remarked,

Well sometimes I get wound up in reading all the other stuff that comes along with it, I don't find exactly what I'm looking for. She gets in there and comes out with answers. Sometimes I don't get the answers. . . . It's probably—my problem is I'm not narrowing it [i.e. his search strategy].

They were using Yahoo, Alta Vista and a "few times" Google for searching. His daughter had found vital medical information that supplemented his doctor's advice. Samuel was quite pleased with their recent online discovery of a supplier of mustard made without vinegar, which was prohibited in his special diet. They had purchased many things online, including leaded glass supplies, and Samuel believed there was no problem with doing so.

Samuel had attended Computer Club meetings faithfully for the four years of its existence (and, he assured me, it was strong and growing), managing to find something useful each time.

Samuel: I usually pick something good out of it. . . . I don't have trouble learning it; I just can't remember it.

NL: Do you take notes?

Samuel: Sometimes . . . and sometimes I don't get the notes complete. So that's one thing I'm finding as I get older, you just don't remember.

NL: You have to use it a lot to make it get in there [i.e. one's mind] and make sense.

Samuel: Well, I'll tell you this—it won't brighten your day—but as you get older, you find that it just doesn't come that easy. . . . The mental powers are not what they used to be.

NL: But you're doing what you can and that is keep using them, keep stretching them.

Samuel: Oh yes and I'm enjoying it. And I spend some time at it, nearly—well every day. If I don't get anything else done, I check my e-mail before I go to bed.

He estimated that he averaged several hours a day on his computer; if the glass shop was closed, Samuel might spend the entire day computing. He was using digital camera and Adobe Photoshop to “massage” his photographs which he exchanged with family via e-mail. About his new great granddaughter he said, “I’ve never seen her except by e-mail pictures.” He hadn’t yet used his scanner much but had plans for it. I complimented him on his “sophisticated” computer knowledge to which he replied, “I’m learning things. And, as I say, I’m having fun with it.” Samuel named three individuals in the Park with whom he exchanged information about computing. This notion of neighborly help led me to observe that Flamingo Park relied a lot on volunteers. Samuel agreed:

A lot. And that's unusual for this kind of home [i.e. retirement community] and it's good. That's one of the big parts of it because when you volunteer you get involved and you're not sitting back and waiting for somebody to wait on you. You get involved.

When I expressed happiness that Samuel remained enthused about learning new things about computing technology, he returned to the issue that was troubling him.

Well, I try to. As I say, I have my troubles remembering. I get into something, ‘Now, what did I do here?’ and I can't remember. And I'll punch on this, that and the other and the first thing you know, I'm off out in left field somewhere. . . . Still, the inner workings of it doesn't make sense to me like some of the younger people. . . . I've even got inside of it a few times. When Sam [his son] will be here, I'll be in there with him, pulling boards out and what have you. But as to why it does anything, I don't know.

Towards the end of our time together Samuel described at some length how the Park administrators suddenly changed their minds about whether or not he would design windows for a meditation room in the Nursing Care Center and, after first declining, they then wanted him to make them with all due haste. He had enlisted the help of several Park residents and together they worked non-stop for several months with his contribution being “hundreds of hours.” Finally, I observed that he was simultaneously working with ancient and very modern technologies. Were they somehow complementary? Did he need them both? Samuel said he didn't know how to answer but summed up his feeling, “This [the glass work] is a hobby and that's [pointing to computer] part of life.”

**Insights:** Samuel received excellent support and soft/hardware from his family members who were eager to help him. He had found new uses for his computer besides keeping track of his expenses: exploring family history, abetting his weakening eyesight, creating with a photo manipulation program and adding to his e-mail contents. With the help of family members, he obtained important medical and health-related information online. He sought help from other residents in the Park as well as the Computer Club lectures. The Internet continued to be a territory in which Samuel got lost, winding up in “left field.” And Samuel had become aware of a flagging memory, a fact which obviously disturbed him. In any case, he viewed computing technology as an integral part of his life.

It was **November, 2005**, before I could sit down with Samuel Dunlop for a **third conversation**. His life had been very unsettled in the five years since we spoke at length, in 2000. His wife’s illness, combined with Samuel’s failing eyesight, resulted in their relocation to a two-room suite in the Assisted Living building. I had stopped by once or twice just to ask how they were getting along but did not want to disturb Myra with a longer visit. I noted, however, that Samuel had brought his computer with him to these very cramped accommodations and he assured me that he continued to use it. However, by 2005, Samuel’s wife had died and he had moved again to a single room in A.L. Other Park residents suggested that he would enjoy my company.

As though no years had elapsed, I found Samuel once again seated in his reclining chair with his feet elevated. He had gained considerably more weight and his legs were wrapped in support hose that an aide had put on. His eyesight had worsened and, although he could no longer read and I was but a “form” to his eyes, he could still get around. Into his 12 by 12 foot room, Samuel had managed to incorporate (in addition to a bed and night stand) his computer desk in one corner and a huge television along the opposite wall, next to his dresser. His recliner took up the remaining space in the middle of the room. Three months earlier, he had replaced his old computer with a Dell because he wanted more capacity for “a heavier video card” and some new programs, such as the one he had seen Cody Peabody demonstrate at a recent Computer Club meeting—Google Earth. With the help of a magnifying glass, he still was able to correspond by e-mail although he could not see well enough to correct any mistakes.

Samuel had managed at last to interest his son in joining his genealogy investigations and they worked late into the night on many occasions. The two of them treated their searching like treasure hunting and Samuel described their finds to me at some length. As to other uses for his computer, Samuel had stopped actively using Quicken for his finances because “I’ve never upgraded it; I’ve still got the old program [from] years ago. They keep wanting me to upgrade because it’ll do this and do that. But what I’ve got [will] do ten times more than I’ve asked it to do.” Samuel had turned these business tasks over to his daughter who did his taxes with a computer program; he had also arranged for online payment of bills. He calculated that he spent one to two hours every day at his computer.

Sam, Jr. and Ann, Samuel’s son and daughter, had both relocated to nearby towns so they were spending a lot of time with their father. With their help (and that of Ann’s son), Samuel ordered a vast array of things online, including computer parts, medical products, books and his clothing. Samuel kept up a rigorous schedule of e-mail correspondence with more distant relatives and with old friends from various ministries. Samuel mentioned feeling “lost” during the eighteen days without his telephone, TV or computer due to the recent storm and lost cable connections. “And I’ll tell you, it was kind of sad. No way of communicating with anybody.” I asked Samuel what computers had done for him. First he mentioned, as he had five years earlier, that computers had become “part of life.” Then he expanded his thoughts.

It’s beginning now to be a research tool. I mean, you want to know something, you used to go look it up in the encyclopedia. Now you look it up on Google. But you can find out just anything in the world you want to know. And so now when the kids are here, we’ll talk about something. ‘What’s so and so?’ They’re both very much with the computer and they go, look it up, see what it says about it.

His failing memory was another issue about which Samuel reiterated his concern.

I told Cody one day, I said, ‘When I’m over here at your Computer Club, I understand every word you say. I know what you’re talking about when you’re talking about it. By the time I get home, I can’t remember what you said. If it’s very important, I write it down.’ I’m finding there’s a lot of times my memory just doesn’t serve me as to how to go, what track to follow to get something.

To my question of whether his computer use had helped his “mental capacity” Samuel said it had. “It keeps you sharp, for one thing. You’ve got to remember certain things, in order to use the thing. It keeps . . . your mental powers working.” Did computing seem like a whole new, foreign language, I wondered?

Yes, I mean the terms are different. It’s a different concept entirely. . . . I told Cody, ‘I understand you, what you’re talking about.’ I’ve had enough exposure to this that I know [enough] terms to know what he’s talking about.



Samuel then offered his optimistic opinion about the future of computing.

I'm excited about the computer. I think a few years down the line—I'm amazed at what changes have been made. . . . I think we're just on the tip of the iceberg. . . . Because there's no limits of what's . . . going to come out of it. . . . It's amazing even now with, as it is used. You can send e-mails anywhere in the world.

During the previous two years, Samuel had simplified his life in a number of ways. He had given his car to his son and didn't miss it "that badly" because of the Park transportation system. While he was still driving, he had a cell phone because of his need to stay in contact with his ill wife but he had given that up along with his car. He had cancelled his subscription to the newspaper several months earlier since he couldn't read it and he obtained all his current events information from one hour of televised news each evening. "And I've had all the news I want." He and his children watched a lot of movies on his DVD player and in addition they had been receiving movies through NetFlicks for a year. Samuel's grandson bought him an enormous TV when he saw how little his grandfather could see. Sitting four feet away from the screen made the images "life sized" in Samuel's eyes.

There was a very large, Tiffany-style lamp sitting on Samuel's dresser, which I admired, asking him if he considered it to be his *meister werke*. He said he did, "and I'd always said—oh for the last fifteen years—that I wanted to build that lamp sometime before I die. And I got to thinking about it, 'Hey maybe you'd better get started on it.' And it took me about ten months on that." It was a classic pattern, an eighteen-inch "wisteria lamp," and he had completed it about two years earlier. Samuel was no longer able to see well enough to continue with his leaded glass work. He had taught a class on it but hadn't been able to find anybody "that stayed with it."

Since it was late November, Samuel was working on his annual Christmas letter. He planned to send about two hundred of them to various friends around the world. He would have three "life changing" events to report—the death of his wife, the big storm and the loss of his eyesight. I asked him why he considered the storm so significant.

Oh, just the situation around. . . . [I]n some ways it had some good points. But it certainly did make some changes around here. We were without power for four days. And with shutters on the windows, these rooms are awfully dark. . . . I used a flashlight. . . . The generator kept lights on in the hallway, in the lobby, in the dining room and kept the elevators running. . . . We could go out in the common area there, and they brought . . . a television . . . and showed DVDs. . . . Actually we made fun out of it. And it was good to see how well people adjusted to a rough situation. . . . I'm amazed at Flamingo Park; we had three meals a day. . . . It wasn't what we necessarily would have chosen . . . but at least they set a hot meal down in front of us. . . . The togetherness and the ability to kind of roll with the punches . . . [was good]. As I've said several times, and it's proven over and over again here—some folks grow old gracefully; some just grow old.

Samuel's last comment was inspired by his memory of the complaints that some A.L. residents made when the served meals hadn't matched up with the pre-printed menus for the week. He finally advised the dining hall director to stop giving out the menus and just serve whatever food was available. This quelled the grumbling and confusion. We chuckled over the vision of angry diners with raised knives and forks and I observed,

NL: So I would say for you that your computer has helped you grow old gracefully, is helping you grow old gracefully.

Samuel: I hope so. . . . I wouldn't want to be without my computer.

**Insights:** Samuel was more fortunate than he may have realized in having the constant support and close proximity of his two children, as well as the computing support provided by his grandson. Even though he echoed a familiar complaint about the need to repeatedly upgrade software, his worries in that regard were nearly non-existent, thanks to his family. His devotion to his computer was evidenced by his importation of it into his very small living space; it was obviously a vital part of his life and ever more integrated into it. That Samuel's evaluation of and prediction for I-C technologies were so optimistic was based, I believe, on two facts—his own positive nature and his children's knowledge and effective use of them. And it was his supportive family and his positive outlook that enabled him to weather the tragedies of his wife's death, his failing eyesight (and the loss of his creative outlet with leaded glass) and to even find the enjoyable aspects of a killer storm. There was one aspect of Samuel's life, however, for which there was no ready palliative and that was his failing memory and slowing cognitive processes.

Although I always tried to see Samuel when visiting the Park, a primary purpose of our **fourth meeting in 2008** was to see the assistive devices that he was using to augment his very restricted vision due to macular degeneration. He had explored a wide variety of technologies and, as I was to learn, they still included his computer. Even before I entered Samuel's room, I had noticed that his large, purple, Tiffany-style lamp had been moved out of his room and into the Lobby of the Assisted Living (A.L.) building. It was one of the last pieces that Samuel had made before he could no longer see well enough to carry out such projects in the Park workshop. On my previous visit, it was in his room. After he had invited me in, I remarked on its new location. He said, "I figured, put it out there, turn it on, let everybody see." I also commented on the fact that Barbara Howard had typed up a little sign, stating by whom it was made and how

many pieces of glass were in the lamp. He confessed that he could not remember the number of pieces but that it was stated on the pattern for the lamp.

First Day. As before, Samuel was seated in his recliner and on and off he elevated his legs. Then 89, he had no vision in one eye and in the other one, he could only see extended fingers at three feet. He could see the shape of a face but not the features. “I haven’t seen a face in a year,” he remarked. Fortunately, Sam (as most people in the Park then called him) could hear quite well and recognized people by their voices. Sam’s computer screen was nothing more to his eyes than a lighted square. I noticed that his computer keyboard was much larger than three years earlier, to accommodate the large keys/print. He told me that he had software called “JAWS” that spoke what was on his computer. He suggested that I try it and as he directed me to the buttons that would activate it, I surveyed his set up. He had his Dell CPU, two printers—one color—and two external speakers. Some of the keyboard keys had raised bumps and several had bright colors. For some reason JAWS wasn’t activating as usual so Sam described what it did for him.

Sam: It’ll tell you, ‘go for email’ or something that way.

NL: Will it read the e-mail?

Sam: Yeah, you get into there and it says it’s ready for message. You can . . . [press] ‘enter’ and it’ll go ahead and read the whole thing to you. Sometimes it has a little trouble with pronunciation but not much.

NL: Now why have you gone to such great efforts to use your computer?

Sam: Because it’s a joy. [chuckling] Yeah, it’s not worth it really. But I see a lot of Sam Jr. And . . . we keep up with the whole family through e-mail. And I write an e-mail to about thirty of them. [Every] Saturday night. And then on Sunday, I may get three, four, five letters back. I always get one from my brother.

JAWS was still not coming on and Sam said it was because his son or daughter failed to turn it back on after using his computer on a recent visit.

Sam: And now see—they’re got me fooled here. Ann was using it last night. Someway she’s turned JAWS off and it’s just not working. . . . I’ve never known how to turn it off. But I do know that the kids turn JAWS off because they don’t like to hear it talk. And, I mean, of course, they can do it a lot faster without hearing all that rattling. . . . That’s one thing I’ve fussed at them about. ‘It’s all right. You can use it all you want to but you leave it, when you leave it, leave it for me.’

NL: So your computer is still a major communication means.

Sam: Oh yeah, yeah. Now, of course, we bought the printer here. But the rest of it, Veteran’s Administration provided for me. I had an old—I say old, year or so old. They bought me the JAWS software and it worked with a degree of efficiency. But every so often it would get where it wouldn’t work right. . . . And I was down there at the Veteran’s Administration and talked to the visual lady there. . . . I told her we was going to put extra memory in there and try to beef it up. She said, ‘Don’t do that. It won’t

work still like you want it to.’ She said, ‘Let me send you a new computer.’ . . . So in about . . . two and a half weeks this whole thing [was delivered]. I mean it’s about four times more powerful than the one I had.

NL: So you’ve been fooling around with JAWS for three years, maybe.

Next, Samuel showed me his books on tape which he had heard about through the Lighthouse organization.

NL: There are several people in the Park who are virtually blind but maybe they don’t know about this.

Sam: Well, I’ve told them. . . . I spoke and more or less demonstrated everything I could about it. . . . I recorded things just on a regular tape and I could turn it off and on and show them.

NL: Was that at the Computer Club?

Sam: No . . . it was what we call the VIP Club, ‘Visually Impaired People.’ . . . [W]e meet once a month. Oh, there’s fifty, sixty people in it every month depending on more or less what the program is. They had a good crowd last month because they had the man from the library explaining what the new machine was gonna’ be. They’ve been talking for ten years about changing this—see this is my book. [He pointed to an apparatus the size of a very large tape recorder]. And that’s heavy. But he was telling us supposedly that by the . . . the middle of next year . . . the books will be recorded on memory sticks. . . . You don’t have to turn it over, you don’t have to back it up or do anything. . . . And you can turn it off and when you come back, you turn it on and pick up right where you left off and you go right ahead with it. So that’ll be a great thing. This thing . . . is heavy. It weighs ten, twelve pounds. . . . The whole program is run through the Library of Congress but it’s administered through the local libraries. . . . Ann orders them online.

NL: And you can keep them as long as you want—What kinds of things are you reading? [I read from the title on his tapes] ‘John Mortimer, *Rompole a la Carte*, Kathy Reichs, *Break No Bones*, *Deja Dead*, *Doctor Temperance*, Ken Follett, *Code of Zero*.’ So murder mysteries.

Sam: What I’m reading now is the John Jakes book. I’ve read all of his books, historical fiction. The history is correct but the characters are fiction. . . . If they haven’t got them [at the local library], why they’ll order them out of the warehouse. . . . And . . . they can order it from anywhere else in the United States. And they send you the machine, no charge, and you keep the box. And then they’ll send [the books] no charge.

NL: So each book is several cassettes.

Sam: Yeah. . . . They’re four-channel tapes. . . . They won’t play on anything else particularly. But it tells you at the end what to do. And you’ve got your operation [buttons] here: green in the middle is ‘on,’ red is ‘stop.’ And this is . . . eject. [he continue to demonstrate the controls, turning over the tapes, etc.] But probably within the next 24 hours, I’ll finish [this tape] and this is the end of the book. And I’ll put it back in here, close it up and I snap those two and turn it over, take that card out and turn it over, push it back in and it’s ready to go.

NL: So you have to be careful and open [the cassettes] just one at a time. Because if you get your tapes mixed up, they’re way too small to read.

We looked at his other assistive devices such as a gigantic remote control for the TV with huge buttons and numbers, which his daughter gave to him as a Christmas present two years earlier. As to whether he could still see images on his very large TV,

Sam: Not any more. . . . In the last two or three months, I just can't follow it. And my kids will come. I have two children and they're both close by here. And sometimes they come. Sam Jr.'s working there with the computer or something and Ann's doing something . . . and she wants to watch TV. She turns on a program. I'll [makes a clicking noise] put my earphones on [for his books on tape].

NL: So how many hours are you still spending a day on your computer?

Sam: I don't use it that much. I use it—Weekly, I'll use it [pauses] six or eight hours. A lot of times—Usually a lot of times on Saturday night—I get, a lot of times—I'm a cheat. . . . If the kids are here, a lot of times Sam Jr. will say, 'You haven't sent your email yet.' 'All right, get it ready.' And I'll dictate it and he'll type it. . . . It's easier for me and it's not difficult for him. And Ann, she'll do the same thing. She types 75 words a minute.

NL: Ok, so you'll do e-mail. You do the printing out of the color portraits. What other kinds of things? Do you do any searching anymore?

Sam: Use it a *lot*—and the kids do it really. I ask them to—We'll get started here some nights and we won't do anything but use Google. . . . We'll get started—we were watching *Jeopardy* and that's something I can still watch because they read the questions as well as print them. And I can hear. And Sam Jr. and I are both pretty good at answering the questions on that. But once in a while they'll bring up a question and I didn't know that. And he'll turn around there and ask Google. . . . And then that a lot of times will bring up some other question and we'll ask another. And we spend a whole evening here just back and forth with Google.

NL: So your computer use is easiest when they're here to assist you.

Sam: Yes, but I—could—[I] *do* do it by myself at times. And there's certain ones that, uh, I don't want, I don't ask them to—some of the old Army—that I write them a little note or something that way.

NL: What's this thing that resembles a computer?

Sam: This is a reading machine . . . a magnifier.

NL: Do you use that at all?

Sam: Not any more, not much anymore. Again, the Veterans Administration bought that. And at the time I got it, I could put [a text] there and read it. But now I, it has to be multiplied or magnified so much that I can get one or two words on—If I want to know what's on an envelope—. [For example] I find an envelope here on the floor. Is that something I should throw away or—I can turn that on and put it under there and look at the words until I know where it came from. . . . I use it some. And we—my daughter and I with another lady from Jamaica—sing as a trio in the chapel. . . . Once every month or two. . . . It has to be something that I know by memory—old time songs and things that way. Ann will type them out as large as we can get them. And then, I'll put them in [the reading machine] and go over them time and again, make sure that I know what—I have to be refreshed.

NL: So you're pretty active. You've got the singing, you've got the VIP club. Do you go to the Computer Club anymore?

Sam: We haven't been this year. We used to go pretty regular. Just haven't got started. Sam Jr. always went with me because he's the computer man.

NL: What else do you do?

Sam: Well, I serve on a couple of committees. . . . I'm the representative on the Food Committee for A.L.—their monthly meeting—and make suggestions on what could be helped. And people there are so nice to me. They take care of me. I'm on the Chapel Committee.

NL: You don't preach anymore or substitute.

Sam: No, no I, I finally had to quit that. I can't read the scriptures and I can't read the songs. The words or music, I can't see any of that. And, in other words, it'd have to all be by memory and it's just too much. Now the chaplain here, . . . he said, 'We're going to have the Veteran's Day service here on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November. . . . Would you lead us in prayer?' 'Yeah, sure I can do that.' And so anything I can do that way, I'm willing to do. I'm not gonna' try something and make a fool of myself. . . .

NL: Do you ever go to newspapers online or news programs online?

Sam: No, I don't. It's available and I'm aware that it's available.

NL: You could probably get to it if you needed to. Now, can you say to JAWS, 'Go to *NY Times.com*, type in *NYTimes.com*'?

Sam: Yeah. You can look up nearly anything in—there's a key command for anything you can do with the uhh—

NL: Mouse.

Sam: Mouse. It's a matter of learning them. Of course, there's about fifteen or twenty of them that you use all the time and others just on occasion.

NL: I'd say you're making the most of everything you've got.

Sam: Well, that's what I try to do. When . . . I started going blind and . . . I was afraid that I was gonna' go totally blind. The doctor kept telling me that . . . 'you'll never go completely blind where you can't see where the walkways are . . . ' The thing is, it's the center part of your eye that dies. You can see a lot of things peripheral. . . .

NL: Can you see colors?

Sam: Yeah, I do fair on colors. That's one thing I've talked . . . about . . . to the administrator here. . . . I said, 'I may have to have help.' She said . . . 'if it ever becomes necessary, the girls [i.e. the aides] can come in, in the morning, and pick out your clothes, what you're gonna' wear or pick it out before you go to bed at night or something. So that you don't come out with wild things.' And I've seen some of these old folks that have shown up that way with a yellow shirt and a green pair of pants. [laughs] Look like a clown or something and I don't want that. [he says slowly and deliberately] I'm very much so that I want it to harmonize and look nice. . . .

It was the administrator that gave me that little gadget there. It's supposed to tell you what color things are. But it doesn't work much. Now [holding up the device] it says everything's black. But they make equipment like that. That you can put it over and it would say. . . . 'green.' But this one never has worked like it ought to.

The time was about 4:30 and I asked Sam if he was going to go upstairs to Happy Hour. He said that he had no use for Happy Hour but on occasion there was a pianist who played old time songs that he enjoyed listening to. Would he be attending the evening Bingo session, I asked?

Sam: No, I can't see the cards anymore. And I kinda' wish I could just to be in fellowship with other people.

NL: So what do you do of an evening?

Sam: Well, usually I come . . . here [to his room after dinner in the dining room] and listen to the news on [the TV], local and world news. And then comes *Wheel of Fortune* and then *Jeopardy*. And if Sam Jr.'s coming he's always here before time *Jeopardy*'s on. . . . [T]hey kind of take turns. Now, over the weekend, they'll both be here. But Ann is a widow and Sam Jr. has never been married. So they really have no one else themselves. There's usually one of them here. And we've got a lot in cooperation that way. I got Sam Jr. to typing for me. I've got him working on our geneo—our family tree.

As he had done three years earlier, Samuel described at some length the process of searching for ancestors, those he and his son had so far found along with their histories. "And he's better at it than I am. . . . but the two of us together, we can sit down and talk very successfully with people on that line of our family tree." They were particularly interested in those who fought in various battles. Instead of a CD-ROM, they were then using a subscription program, Ancestry.com, that gave them access to the Salt Lake City library records and others, as well. As he talked about it, I remarked to Sam that it was like solving a mystery for them and tied in with his interest in historical fiction. I asked him why genealogical searches appealed to people.

I don't know, you get awfully excited about it when you go to find—you know this man. We whoop and holler all over the place here if we can find the connection between [various relatives]. . . . You find out that you've got some real nice people in your line and so forth and you find some scoundrels.

This discussion led us back to the books he read on nineteenth century history and the books on tape program. Sam said that he averaged about two books a week, depending on size.

NL: So you can just lean back and put on your headphones and let the story unfold. What could be nicer.

Sam: I love it. . . . Put it up here on my lap. And a lot of the time, the kids think I'm asleep. I'm not asleep. I'm just listening. But really I'm kind of lost in what's going on in the story. . . . And they go ahead and watch their TV and do what they want to do.

NL: Outstanding. This is so fascinating with all the assistive devices around you. You have done everything you could. I'm very impressed.

Sam: Well I keep trying. If I find something. . . . I'll go with anything that I can do to be independent. I don't want to have to depend on somebody leading me by the hand.

Once again, I reminded Samuel of the Happy Hour concert. This led him to think of another device that he had—a talking watch that told the time when a button was pressed. It wasn't working well and he thought he would have to call the V.A. for more batteries.

NL: It seems as if the Veterans Administration is doing OK by you.

Sam: They have done marvelously well in this area. Now I can't say that it's the same all over. But here in [this] area, they have done well with the visually impaired. And they'll furnish anything that way—they'll furnish you a talking watch and an electric razor, I don't know, just any number of—. The last time I went down there, I came back with a sack full of little goodies. Up on my table [in the dining room] I had—[he motions as though feeling around for something on a surface] my buddy there [said], 'What are you

looking for?' I said 'I'm looking for a red gadget.' And he knew what it was. I've got a little square thing there, it's got two prongs. And, I don't like my tea too strong. And they'll put out a glass of water and then a glass of strong tea. And I'll set that glass of water up there and put that gadget on there and then just pour it in there. And when the buzzer goes off, she's [the cup] full up. It's just two prongs here and when the water makes an electrical connection, well that's full enough. . . . I appreciate my gadget. . . . I hear them, somebody says, 'What is that?' And they go, 'Oh, Dunlop.' They know it's some kind of gadget . . . that I—[have].

NL: What kind of assistance can you get with voting?

Sam: Ordinary uh—can't think what they call it. Yeah, I sent in and got my ballot and I've already voted. And as far as I'm concerned, the election's over.

NL: So your kids helped you fill it out?

Sam: Ann set here and gritted her teeth and filled in some and marked it. [laughs] Because that's a funny thing why she's that way. She's [strongly] one way and I kinda' [favor] the other, I guess.

NL: Does that have to do with age?

Sam: I don't know. Sam Jr. is four years younger than she is and he's—Sam Jr. and I are the Republicans. Ann's a solid Democrat and I don't know why.

NL: So then, is there a place that says, 'filled out by X due to visual impairment' or—?

Sam: Yeah, I think she has to sign it. Well I signed it and then she signed it. Well, I sign my name. Well I wonder what all I have signed 'cause I can't see what I'm signing. If they'll hold a finger down there then I can come along at the end of the finger and sign my name. And it's readable. Of course, I've signed that name thousands of times in my lifetime. But I can't see it t'all. And I go down to the doctor's office, she'll hand me a sheet and I say, 'I can't fill this out. You read 'em to me and I'll give you the answers or you show me where to sign and I'll sign.'

NL: Thank goodness you have two children who love you enough to take you places.

Sam: That is a marvelous thing. And I'm afraid I didn't always realize that as much as I do now. Because they come every night, we have even gone traveling. Last year, a year ago this summer, the three of us went to, went up to southern Illinois, visited relatives and so forth. Of course Sam Jr. and Ann did the driving. Yeah, I didn't do much along the way. Just set there and look at the glare. But again we took the book along. I took the—all you have to do is unplug the earphone and then everybody can hear.

NL: You share similar reading interests?

Sam: Yeah, close enough.

NL: Well that's a wonderful thing. No matter what political party they belong to, they love you and you love them.

Sam: That's the truth. And there's no doubt about that. We go out together every Saturday night, have dinner together somewhere. It's usually on me.

NL: I am happy that you have that support.

Sam: We have a good fellowship—.



The Next Day. Samuel had invited me to return to see if he could get JAWS activated for me to see. In the course of telling me about another of his favorite activities (an after dinner coffee hour with a small group of residents), he broached a topic that others in the Park had also mentioned—the cognitive failings of some of the residents in A.L.

Sam: Usually, it's me and about a half a dozen women. We're so enormously outnumbered here. There's about five or six men here altogether. And there's about four of us that are not married. And then the other two or three have their wives here. So if you're going to have any fellowship, it's going to be female fellowship. . . . Some of them are very good friends and some of them we tolerate. . . . It's one of the battles I've been fighting here. . . . They've got too many here in this Assisted Living that are completely nuts. . . . There's twelve, fifteen of them that, they're just nuts. I mean that's one way of putting it but I hate to call it crazy but—

NL: And that's because they've run out of space at the Nursing Care Center?

Sam: No, I don't think so. I think it's probably more or less because of families. The family don't want their loved ones put over—[in the Nursing Care Center]. That's kind of the last—. And they keep 'em here, keep 'em—. Well, they don't realize what it's doing to the rest of us to keep them here.

He described the behaviors of a half a dozen of the residents who were disoriented, unable to find their way, wandered off and had to be rounded up, were not in control of their emotions or endlessly repeated the same stories. It was these individuals who disrupted the coffee group when they were trying to socialize and converse. He pointed out that there was not enough help in A.L. to attend to these specialized needs. An A.L. administrator had remarked that one of the women wouldn't "last six weeks" if she were put in the Nursing Care Center. To that Samuel said,

Sam: Well probably she wouldn't. But, I, I'm getting almost to the point of saying 'Well that's just part of life.' . . . It is a problem and you don't want to say, really you don't want to say anything against them or make it rough on them but. . . . Well they take pretty good care of them over there in the Nursing Care Center and they've got help to do it – supposedly they've got enough help. Well they don't here. I mean they've got two or three people. And they just bring them [i.e. the senile residents] in here and then just turn them loose. And boy, all kinds of things go on. I mean so far there's been nothing of serious nature or—. But they're gonna' eventually—somebody's going to get real hurt or they're going to hurt somebody else. And there's gonna' be heck to pay.

Samuel agreed with my observation that there was an urgent need for expansion of both the A.L. and Nursing Care Center (which includes a wing for seriously demented residents) facilities. However, the Park was experiencing the same economic difficulties as other institutions and their proposed plans for new facilities seem to have been placed on hold for several years. In fact, as Samuel noted, the Park administration had been economizing recently in the dining rooms. Since Sam served on the Food Committee, he listened to both the residents' wishes and the administrators' reasoning for purchasing less expensive cuts of meat—steak

instead of calf's liver, for example. I told him that I knew a Park resident who felt that his special dietary needs were not being met and that I had heard that there was no dietician in the Park. He informed me that there was one dietician and that she had a "whale of a load." He said they had tried to improve diets.

As the A.L. representative on the Food Committee, not all of Sam's requests had to do with the menu.

Sometimes we've got special needs that they don't have elsewhere, put it that way. And we have, they have done certain things for us because of special needs and probably we've got more, may have more visually impaired or special diets and things that way than they would have elsewhere. And one thing that they did do, they gave us a new set of dishes and they're green. Because of the contrast for the visually impaired people. . . . You put a white potato in a green plate, you can see it. You put a white potato in a white plate, you chase it all around. . . . And so they've done several things that way just to meet special needs. And they [residents] can get it in the other dining room if they ask for it. But they don't, they haven't done it for an overall thing.

We ended our discussion that day with the agreement that I would return on the next morning to photograph his assistive devices.

The Following Morning. When I knocked on his open door it was about 9:30 and Sam was sitting in his recliner waiting for an aide to come. He required her assistance to put on his support stockings, which he needed due to poor circulation from his diabetes. He was hoping that she would come soon because he wanted to go to the Assembly Building for the fourth and final two-hour session sponsored by the Lighthouse. These weekly sessions consisted of teaching the visually impaired people strategies for how to get through their daily lives. I brought up the subject of currency telling Sam about some of the ways other countries handle paper money with differing sizes and raised bumps. He described to me how he impressed the attendees at one Lighthouse session by taking out his wallet and showing his trick of folding each bill in a different way. Samuel had heard that the U.S. Congress had passed or introduced a bill to begin minting paper money that is distinguishable by touch but that he didn't know how they planned to do it.

Samuel explained more about the Saturday morning trivia game that he had mentioned the day before.

Sam: It's called the word game. And, uh, Sarah, our aide—the only white aide we have—leads that. . . . She's got books and things that way. And she asks questions and we try to answer them. It's a trivia type of thing.

NL: And you said that you sent Barbara [Howard] off to try to find the answers.

Sam: Yeah, she has it for next week. That's her homework. . . . I remember one that I asked to find out about, 'Who was the first president to live in the White House?' And I think the correct answer was Madison.

NL: Really? That long? I thought maybe it was one of the Adams but I don't remember for sure.

Sam: Adams, it was Adams. It was early. But I thought it was later than that. And there was some disagreement. . . . And we talked about it. So Barbara asked Google. And we get into big discussions that way sometimes on just some little old something that doesn't really make any difference. I know one that I was assigned to. The question was, what state was the birthplace of the Black man that did so much research—George Washington Carver. And I said, 'Alabama.' 'No, that's not correct.' It finally proved out that he was born in Missouri. . . . And so I looked it all up on—had Sam Jr. to—[Google it].

Sam went on to tell me all the facts that he learned about Carver's research, including the Google 'facts' that questioned whether he did all that he was credited for doing. Then, I asked him how many people usually attended the Word Game hour.

Sam: Oh, twelve, fourteen. Some of 'em are good at it, work at it and there's others that haven't answered the first question yet. And wouldn't know they had the right answer if they did.

NL: Is this a relatively new activity?

Sam: Oh, it's been going on for a while [later guesses six months.]. . . . I love it. I love it probably because I find that this is one place where I can hold my own or even better. I can answer a lot of the questions.

NL: Participate fully. Is there a new director here or a new aide that's brought this?

To answer this question, Sam told me the history about the switching back and forth of two women between various positions in the Park, including the one as director of A.L. About the second one he said,

Sam: But uh she's a doll. And we loved her. She was great. We thought when she left that we were ruined completely. And then they turned around and got [the first one] back. And so this is her second turn at it. But [she's] good, she's very good. Different way but she's a doll.

NL: It's good that there's more activities. Yesterday, I participated in the Assisted Living 'fitness activity,' the basketball and ring toss and—

Sam: Games, that's real—This is only the third time I think trying it. It's brand new. I was able to do the first one. You know, it's funny thing. I didn't do so bad at the basketball toss. [chuckles] But there in the center is a white blob [as he sees it] and I throw the ball towards the white blob and a lot of the times it went it. And I think I got—what was it—I got ten out of twenty-one . . . which is not bad—

The time was passing so I asked Samuel if I could help him with his stockings so he did not miss the Lighthouse talk and he said, "She'll [i.e. an aide] be here. If she's not, I'll push a button." While he continued to wait, I asked him about one of his activities, the printing of the portraits of some of the residents of the Assisted Living residence. How did he get the photos from Sturgis (the informal portrait photographer), I wondered.

It comes in on e-mail. He just sends them over—When he's ready, they'll just show up on e-mail and we'll print them. . . . It's set on there, 'Done by Dunlop.' It should really say, 'Sam Jr.' [chuckles]. . . . Sam Jr. just, you know, picks it up there and comes a copy of it and I take it to them at breakfast—

Earlier in our visit Samuel mentioned that he had JAWS set up for me to see but as he was still hoping to get to the Lighthouse session, I suggested that I would try to return later in the day to see it. We ended our talk then as I had another appointment and I left him waiting for the aide to come. I was not able to return to his room for more conversation. But I did see Samuel on my last morning in the Park and said “good bye.” He was seated in the Assisted Living lobby chatting with some of the ladies. He appeared quite happy there, in their fellowship.

**Insights:** Given that Sam's eyesight began to wane along with the health of his wife and that they had to give up their cottage and move to Assisted Living for her care, some might have predicted a bad outcome for Samuel after his wife's death, such as depression or a swift demise. And yet, I found him, four years after her death and with very little vision left, to be one of the most contented of the Park residents. How was that possible? What had kept Samuel emotionally afloat? The first obvious answer was his personality. He possessed a set of attributes that suited him for preaching, public performing, and social interaction: out going-ness; self assurance; a strong, deep voice; and an optimism about life that was apparently supported by religious faith. That Samuel sought out opportunities for fellowship, as he put it, was not surprising given his life as a minister. But it was nevertheless an elegant way to express the importance of interacting with those around him. What I had failed to appreciate until this recent visit was the element of *harmony* that guided Samuel. It was at the heart of his publicly performed singing. It was apparent in the beautiful pieces of leaded glass that he made and contributed to the Park, especially the windows of the meditation room in the Nursing Care Center. Until he mentioned his difficulty seeing his wardrobe, I had not noticed it in his clothes because I rarely noted much difference in the attire of 'Park casual' that was dictated by a hot climate. And yet, he was spelling it out—he wanted everything to harmonize.

A thrival strategy for Samuel was remaining active in Park activities both within the Assisted Living building and in the wider sphere outside of A.L. He contributed to the common good of his community through sharing information about assistive devices and through service on committees. In fact, committee membership was a means for him to advocate for himself as well as others. Two examples are his input into menus and persuading administrators to use a darker color crockery in the A.L. dining room.

Another important element in thriving in the Park is to garner recognition and gratitude through service and contribution of one's time and/or talent. Such participation gains access to the ear of administrators and other staff who "take good care," as Sam said, of such residents. First and foremost, Sam offered his ministering services to the Park during his first years there. After he retired (a second time) from that, he continued to serve as a substitute pastor. And as he said in 2008, he could still be called upon to offer an occasional prayer or invocation, as needed.

An interest in genealogy was shared by other Park residents and, reportedly, by many other older computer users and Samuel's interest was studied and intense. As we age, we are naturally inclined to find ways to remain connected with the chain of life, with those who preceded us and those who follow. We seek a means to insure a lineage and attachment to our land base. Hearing of the Dunlops' excitement as they found such connections in the written record led me to consider the plight of immigrants, such as Laslo Unterweg, another Computer Club member, who are living in 'foreign' lands and whose displacement may foster feelings of estrangement as they age and lose human connections.

Samuel was, at last, in synch with his two adult children which hadn't always been the case. Family schisms over political and other differences had been put aside in the interest of enjoying each other's company in Sam's last years. Together, they had developed a rich relationship due, in no small measure, to their fortuitous nearby residences. Since neither of Sam's children was married at the time, they were also free to spend considerable time with him. His physical limitations might also have been the impetus for their frequent visits. Both of Samuel's children had become stand-ins for their father's e-mail duties which he had routinized as a Saturday night news exchange with his relatives. However, Sam wanted to keep some of his mail private—a challenge when proxies are involved—such as that with his Army buddies. But Sam's children were doing more than assisting their father's computer use. Their helping duties had evolved into a family entertainment night in which they used Samuel's computer as a complement to their television watching. They had interwoven Googling and *Jeopardy*-watching into a synergistic, dual-tech experience. At those times, the social interaction element of computing was for them not *on-line*; it was *in-person*.

**General Discussion:** "To google"; it's difficult to recall when that the search engine became a verb. Albert Swenson commented on Google at a Computer Club meeting around the turn of the twenty-first century in which he advised us that Google was going to be a big thing. I

countered that he might be over-stating the case and regarded it as just the latest in a stable full of choices like Alta Vista, Lycos and Yahoo. By 2008, some of my Park acquaintances knew when they were using Google and others didn't. Samuel and family were very aware of its existence and capabilities, and Samuel regarded it as the final authority for answers. It was not clear to Neva Evans or Barbara Howard, however, that Google had insinuated itself into their web browsers with its search box at the ready. They did not concern themselves with what constituted a "search engine" and had long ago lost track of the fact that there were/are many of them with Google being but one. In a curious way, Google was both evident and transparent.

Throughout the years of our acquaintance, Samuel never expressed any doubt in the value of his computer, stating repeatedly that it was a "part of life." He initially approached the Internet, however, with caution and asked me in 1996 to guide him. He believed that it had enormous potential and was eager to tap into that. Several years later, he still was not entirely comfortable in Internet territory where he often lost his way. He eventually entrusted the exploration of this rapidly growing resource to his children whose success in finding the information he needed reinforced Samuel's positive evaluation of it. Over the years, Samuel and his children moved closer together both in physical proximity and in mind and spirit. They united around Samuel's care and interests. And it was mainly his son, daughter and grandson who were instrumental in keeping him in the technological stream of things. Ironically, it may have been Samuel's failing eyesight that allowed him to retain his very positive attitude towards computer-related technologies. By having computer savvy children act as his proxies he was spared the frustration that beset other Park residents over the never-ending onslaught of niggling mishaps that constituted their computer use.

Research studies of computer-supported collaborative learning, play and work (Twidale and Jones 2005) would seem relevant to Samuel's life since all three elements were 'happening' around his computer. Samuel and his son (the latter reluctantly, at first) collaborated in their exploration of ancestry databases and in their goal to find the missing branches of their family tree. Samuel was the driving force but he depended upon his son's eyesight to do the reading and typing involved in the task. This collaboration had playful moments as evidenced by the excited "whooping and hollering" by the two of them over successful searches. Theirs was not, strictly speaking, a work context but Samuel's long-term quest for information about his family's place in history entailed years' worth of uncountable hours of 'serious work' in the sense of expended

energy. That the learning involved in their endeavor was not in service of formal schooling or income did not obviate the fact that it was at the heart of their endeavor and the source of their satisfaction.

There is another analytical lens through which the collaborative behavior of Samuel and his children can be examined—that of “nurturing technology” (Zafiroglu and Asokan 2009). Samuel was mending and cementing previously fragile ties with his son and daughter through the activities they were sharing, including car travel, meals, trips to various agencies and, within the confines of his living space, the use of communication technologies. While Samuel read his books on tape, his children watched his TV. While they watched TV game shows together, they simultaneously used the computer to look up answers to the game questions. This evening-long activity was, I would suggest, only tangentially about learning, even though it involved the ostensible acquisition of facts and information. Samuel’s tone and demeanor (as he described it to me) indicated that the more salient aspect of this behavior was the time spent with his children. Thus the nurturing aspect of their (combined) use of the television and computer technologies was the strengthening of ties and the fostering of their family well-being.

Macular degeneration is a growing problem for our society as the aging population increases. This uncorrectable vision impairment that was experienced by Samuel, Laslo Unterweg, Nelson Jones and other Club members results ultimately in near blindness and, for many, dependence. Given the numbers of the population who will suffer from it, there is an urgent need for the development of more reliable and helpful assistive technologies. There are many apparatuses in addition to computing devices that could be designed to speak. Samuel—a dedicated reader—is reading with his ears, and his statement that a new, more manageable device for accessing “talking books” is hopeful. It is heartening that the country’s libraries are involved in supplying this service. Voice recognition software such as JAWS is an intermediary between computer and user but it can’t read non-digitized material. Perhaps the “reading machine” (the device which magnifies materials put in it) could be made to ‘speak’ that material. Although Samuel had not found other gadgets such as his color interpreter, water detector or talking watch reliable, they are modest examples of the possibilities. Lastly, it is disappointing that the U.S. government has been so slow to develop differentiated paper money.

The Lighthouse-sponsored VIP program held in the Park Assembly Building is a good example of the ways in which the Park utilized community resources beyond its gates. There

were many other health-related programs, screenings and testing that were brought onsite for the convenience of residents who no longer drove. Samuel was able to obtain his assistive apparatuses through the Veteran's Administration but where do non-veterans go for such assistance? And what should constitute a veteran, that is, a person who worked for his country in times of war? What about the many civilians who were recruited to work for the war effort, such as Laslo Unterweg? Why have they never been rewarded for those vital services? These queries beg the broader question of what governmental and societal support will be made available for the masses of elderly citizens with varying forms of impairment? How will such citizens become informed of whatever services are made available?

The issue of the integration of residents with differing levels of mental acuity is at the crux of the quality of life for the aging in a life-long care community where it involves a delicate balance of appeasing and meeting the needs of all residents. The mixing of cognitive abilities in Assisted Living seemed to be a non-issue for some like Barbara Howard (although she had manifested some ambivalence about this). But other residents like Samuel were adamant about the wrongness of the practice. The presence of certain residents disrupted his pleasurable activities such as the reading/trivia group and a post dinner conversation circle. What Samuel described and I observed among some A.L. residents (whom he viewed as senile) was that which researchers in the field of aging refer to as "Off-Target Verbosity (OTV)," defined as "speech that is both copious and lacking in focus" (Arbuckle, Nohara-LeClair and Pushkar 2000, 65). Researchers on this subject report that OTV interferes with inter-personal communication, especially in the context of autobiographical reminiscing. And viewing the matter from a different angle, there is research on the subject of autobiographical reminiscing which suggests that,

older adults who retell their experiences in positive ways during autobiographical conversations may be constructing more positive images of themselves in the public domain. Such positive images are likely to be beneficial in terms of how well their social partners respond. (Pasupathi and Carstensen 2003, 440)

These two sets of research findings considered in tandem, present an interesting scenario for the coffee klatches of Assisted Living in which neither the cognitively sound residents nor the cognitively diminished residents can tell their stories with any degree of satisfaction.

There is one more factor to consider with regard to this dilemma of clashing stories. Samuel Dunlop's feelings can be viewed in the context of the need for intimacy. His strenuous complaints focused on what he perceived to be a threat to his hour of friendship with groups of



women and that may have been the heart of the matter. Any meaningful connection he might make with the cognitively fit women was diluted if not undermined by the presence of those who continually interjected their wandering thoughts into the ongoing conversational flow. They were ruining his opportunities for meaningful interaction—his answer to the pleasure of romance and the need for intimate association. As always, Samuel was just seeking the opportunity to be in “good fellowship.”

## CHAPTER 6

### A PROFILE IN ADAPTABILITY: NEVA EVANS (AGED 75–85)

My first impressions of Neva, described in field notes of 1999 were:

Neva is an attractive and vivacious woman, medium height and slender build; with honey-blond hair framing pale, clear skin; stylish attire. She radiates a welcoming charm and warmth and appears happy and self confident, notwithstanding her occasional self-deprecating remarks. One is hard pressed to believe that Neva had a stroke when she was 69, the only visible sign being a slight limp. Neva, who occasionally voices regionalisms, such as, “God willing and the creek don’t rise,” speaks openly, with good humor and hearty laughter. Her home décor mirrors her handsome appearance with a pleasing array of antique furniture.

When Neva first invited me to visit her cottage, in **May of 1999**, she was 75 and married to Peter, who was still regularly practicing medicine at 79. They were both from an easterly state, at the juncture of the Mason Dixon line, and she had the pleasing drawl of the area. They lived in a major mid western city for eight years while Neva’s husband was in medical training after which they moved to a southerly state. Neva had attended several colleges (including Carnegie Tech) but her interests were too “eclectic” to stick with just one subject; she referred to herself as “basically lazy.” Neva had pursued several avocations, especially those related to healing therapies.

Neva and Peter moved to the Park in 1996. Unlike many other computer-using residents at the Park, Neva did not ‘inherit’ outgrown computers or receive tech advice from her children. Apparently, her three daughters were not computer fans, although two of them used them at work. Neva educated herself about computers by taking classes at an area vocational school, attending weekly and monthly Computer Club meetings and guest lectures (brought to the Park by local agencies), and through talking with the computer users among her acquaintances. Just three months before our first visit, Neva had purchased a Compaq laptop computer, a decision over which she had agonized for two years. She told me that she had long been the “laughing stock” of the computer club. “They kidded me a lot. Every week they’d say, ‘Well Neva, do you have your computer yet?’”

The problem was that Neva had wanted a Macintosh computer, ever since she and her husband bought one for their grandson as he was entering college in the late 1980’s. “I played with it a little bit . . . and I thought, ‘Oh, man, is this fun.’ And it was so user friendly. I loved it.” With computer club members and various Park friends, she mulled over the matter of *whether* and *what* to buy.

And then I talked to Marion . . . the lady who has a Macintosh. And, of course, she's very happy with it and yet she felt like, 'Well everybody else [in the Club] has the, the uh Windows.' [And, Club members] just kept saying, 'Well you want to have what everybody else has so if you have questions, you can ask everyone.' So I got sucked in. . . . That's one of the reasons why I waited so long cause I really wanted a Macintosh.

Finally, a friend (who owned a PC-type laptop), took Neva to the store asserting, "We're going to get [you] one." Why was Neva interested in this new technology? "It just intrigues me. . . . The things the computer can do just blow me away. . . . There's a group that meets here once a month. They bring all kinds of equipment and they have different people come." She offered the following reason for her purchase of a laptop computer. "Space. And I thought if I do want to take it with me—. We have a little place in [another state]. And if I ever want to take it with me I can."

Neva told me that, thus far, she had only been experimenting with a little e-mail using AOL, the Internet provider recommended by the Computer Club members. In order to show me her computer, Neva raised the cover of an antique desk and opened a drawer. The laptop was crammed inside. Although using it was a rather awkward matter since there was no cleared, level surface on which to rest it, Neva turned it on to show me a few features. She could do a little e-mail and was upbeat about the prospect of learning more. She called her laptop her "little fellow." Apparently, Neva was keeping the computer out of sight because Peter didn't want to have anything to do with it. Although they had attended classes together on computer applications, Peter would nod off. He did not warm up even to the idea of e-mail with their relatives. Neva (saying that she didn't want to put words into his mouth) offered this assessment of how her husband might be feeling.

I think he has always . . . I mean very bright, you know, a doctor. And you know . . . the MDs don't want to think that someone else knows more than they know. . . . [I]t's my guess that he might feel somewhat intimidated and he doesn't want to not know how to do it. And I said [to him], 'Just come look at this; it's so much fun.' . . . And he said [she imitates a gruff voice] 'All right, I'm looking. What is it you're doing?' So finally I showed [him an e-mail from a friend]—. He said, 'Well, so is that better than the telephone!' And I said, 'Oh, no, it's just different. And it's cheaper.' 'Oh, well,' he said, 'that's appealing.' [she laughed] And that was about the end of it. He was done. . . . And what was it he said to me the other night? And I've heard several husbands say this. 'You don't fool with computers. . . .', [As another husband said:] 'I've got a rival. That computer is a real rival to me.'

Later on, I got a taste of Peter's disgruntlement with computing when I met him as he arrived home for lunch at the conclusion of my talk with Neva. When she mentioned to him that I was there to help her with her computer, he remarked brusquely, "Good night" and went to another room. It was noon, at the time.

**Insights:** Although Neva's initial feeling toward *computers* was very positive—even enthusiastic—her attitude toward her own computer was laden with ambivalence and conflict from its very purchase. She had wanted an Apple product but was persuaded by others (Computer Club members, local friends) to buy a PC. She was excited by the prospect of exploration but her husband was openly hostile to the technology and even those associated with it. He was not only threatened with the prospect of failing to learn the technology, he was also jealous of the attention directed towards the device that had come into his household. Neva was unusual in two ways compared to other Park residents who were new to computing. Most people had full-sized computers which they had inherited from relatives; Neva's was small and portable and she was flying solo with regard to family support.

In **August of 2000**, I spoke with Neva by phone while I was in Park. She was just about to leave on a trip with one of her daughters so had no time to meet with me. She told me, though, that Peter had died that year, that she was “all right” and that she was doing a bit more with her computer. She also told me that she was living in the new cottage that she and Peter had been waiting for; he unfortunately died shortly after they moved in. She told me to be sure to call her on my next trip.

I met with Neva for a **second time, in March of 2001**, for an update on her life and computing. Together, we admired her larger cottage with its magnificent view of the large pond and flowering trees and Neva told me more about Peter's death. Although he had, for many years, resisted retirement *and* getting older, he finally decided the time had come, and after months of preparation in his medical practice, he stopped working. Six days later, he was dead, struck down, apparently, by a sudden heart attack while seated in their cottage. Her family and friends and the Park community helped her in her period of grief. “This is the most wonderful place to be at a time like that. I just so feel so, so, such support. People have been wonderful. And I have some friends here that are just wonderful friends.”

With regard to her computer use since our first meeting, Neva had found many more old friends and acquaintances to e-mail, and had explored the “Net” a bit. She stated that she used her computer an average of one to three hours per day, which either displeased or surprised her family members,

Like my husband used to say, 'Are you on that damned computer?!' And [my daughter] said, 'It's funny . . . , we would be out there in that sunroom and all be talking, you know. . . . We realized Mama's disappeared. . . . She was back [t]here on her computer.' But I don't take very long. I just, you know, look at my e-mail.

At the time of this visit, Neva was trying to find a way to use her computer to ease the task of sending holiday greeting cards; her Christmas cards for the year of 2000 were still unmailed in March.

Neva: I don't know how to make an address book, I'm ashamed to admit. And I should ask the Computer Club but I don't because it makes me look too stupid [she laughed loudly].

NL: This is the express purpose of the club.

Neva: I know it is, I know it is. But then, somebody tells you how to do it and unless I'm doing it, I'm not going to know anyway. I have to be in the chair and do it and everybody wants to come in and do it for you, you know, and that doesn't get it.

Neva returned, a little later in our conversation, to the issue of her reluctance to reveal ignorance.

That's why I took that course out at [the] vo-tech. And I thought, 'Well, I'm going to be in a class with people I don't know. It doesn't make any difference whether I'm smart . . . I'll walk in there and I'll just learn what I can learn. And . . . after . . . I thought, 'My God . . . this is not that tough!'

Eventually, Neva and I decided that a good, interim solution for getting her holiday cards out would be to create address labels for them. Someone had already set up a template for her on her computer but she was frustrated because she did not know how to do it herself so that she could modify and change it, as needed. I offered to help her learn how. She led me to the master bedroom where I saw her laptop, now precariously perched on the pullout shelf of a tiny stand. Nearby was the printer Neva had acquired since our first meeting. I remarked that her computer was out of the drawer and she replied,

Yeah, well, and came into the bedroom where it would never—. And my music's in the bedroom and my TV is in the bedroom, none of which was in the bedroom before. Well, the TV was . . . but we rarely turned it on back here.

When we talked again about her decision to buy a laptop, Neva mentioned her husband's negative feelings about computers. She suggested that it was the inconspicuousness of the laptop that appealed to her. "I didn't want the whole nine yards, you know, because I wanted to sit in the room where Peter was. You know, and I'm glad that I did it that way especially after the way it turned out."

Neva, in other words, wanted an *unobtrusive* computer. She recalled [with laughter] her husband's unrelenting hostility towards computers. "Like Peter [said], 'I will die computer

illiterate.’ And he did.” While we were talking again about Peter’s death, I asked Neva how she felt about her solitude.

Well, I always did enjoy time alone and I’d do a lot of different stuff that satisfies me, you know, or fulfills me, or whatever. Um, I don’t miss Peter like I did. . . . I used to just miss, you know, just miss the companionship so much. In the beginning, it was—particularly weekends, you know, like Saturday and Sunday. Because we had our Saturdays and Sundays together, you know. . . . It was a missing almost more than a loneliness.

**Insights:** Neva’s computer had been liberated from its hiding place in her desk drawer and moved to the comfort space of her bedroom. As a good wife, she had striven for compromise, trying to accommodate her husband’s feelings and her conflicting desires to spend time both with him and her computer. Given her seeming compliant approach to marriage, it is remarkable that Neva persevered in the face of her husband’s obdurate attitude about this technology.

It was very important for Neva that she not reveal her ignorance to anyone she knew even though she was surrounded in the Computer Club with people equally devoid of computing skills. She felt strongly enough about not looking “stupid” that she went to another town to attend a computer class. Neva expressed a profound understanding about learning which was that she had to be sitting “in the chair” in order to truly comprehend a new skill.

One year later, in **February of 2002**, I had a **third meeting** with Neva who, I had heard, had some exciting changes in her life. I was quickly introduced to two new features. The first was her new computer set up, which was now out of the bedroom and in the middle of the social hub of her home—the sunroom. Her laptop had been augmented with a standard-sized monitor and both were clearly visible on an antique table located at the border of the formal living room and sunroom. The monitor was a birthday present from Neva’s new beau, Tally, whom I met when he dropped off an AOL installation disk that she needed. Neva and Tally had gradually renewed their acquaintanceship in the wake of the deaths of their spouses, communicating, at first, mainly by telephone *and* e-mail, even though they both lived in the Park. But in the last few months, things had picked up steam and they had gone on a cruise together in November.

Tally was, apparently, quite comfortable with computing and had given a presentation to the Computer Club about eBay which he used. They occasionally used Neva’s computer together when he was visiting, looking up something on the “Net,” for instance. After hearing her story, I shared an observation with Neva. “Your computer evolution is related, to some extent, to your

relationships in interesting ways.” She agreed enthusiastically and later in our discussion, echoed this idea. “It’s almost like the evolution of the romance in a way, you know. . . . I hadn’t even thought of that until you mentioned it.”

The two of them had been discussing yet another arrangement for her computer. Their plan was to buy a bigger, dedicated computer desk that Neva wanted to put in the corner of her new (enclosed) patio space. She described to me how she imagined the set up, right down to the place for pencils. She and Tally went shopping for the desk but couldn’t agree on a style because the one Neva liked didn’t blend, according to him, with her other furniture. But once they did decide, Neva’s computer would have its fourth (though it may be precipitous to suppose, final) resting place.

Somewhat later, Neva received a telephone call from Tally. After speaking with him briefly, Neva swore me to secrecy, and then told me about their upcoming caper. Tally had written a skit, entitled, “Romance, Park Style,” which they planned to perform in the Park’s annual variety show in March. The three-minute skit was about a couple that was finding their attempts at romance foiled by various physical “failings.” Neva and Tally would act this out behind a screen, in silhouette. At the end, they would reveal themselves, kiss and exit. This event was going to be their “coming out,” a declaration to the Park community that they were indeed a couple. Neva believed that their relationship was not yet widely known throughout the Park but at least one woman kept asking her when they would be getting married.

Well, of course, I must tell you that this woman who asked me that . . . and she’s 93, I think. So I mean you can see why she would. And she’s, ‘Well, I think it’s just wonderful. . . . You’re just a wonderful couple!’ But it was funny when she asked me that the other day. I walked up and [she said] ‘When are you going to get married!’ I looked at her and I said, ‘Well, Brenda, I’m not pregnant so I don’t have to give a child a name.’ [We laughed at the thought of this exchange.]

Neva’s daughter had a somewhat different reaction when Neva was sharing with her the giddiness she felt at the very first stages of this courtship.

I remember telling [her], on the phone . . . ‘I sat beside Tally in Computer Club tonight.’ And she said, ‘Mama, you sound just like high school.’ And we laughed because this whole Park is so high school. And I thought, isn’t that funny, how people start one way and they wind up—. It’s like Shakespeare said, you know, mewling and puking and maybe mewling and puking in the end, as well.

Her sentiment was repeated when I remarked that the Park talent show reminded me of my high school variety shows.

Yeah! It’s like high school, honey, it’s like high school. We just have wrinkles [laughs]. It’s as if you said, ‘There’s this young person running around down in here.’ [she pointed to her abdomen]

We talked a bit about aging and the quality of being old or at least elderly. Again, she mentioned how her husband, Peter, had fought retirement and did not embrace the idea of aging.

Peter liked what he did; he loved what he did. But I think that he resisted, he just . . . , ‘I’m not going to get old,’ you know. . . . So he was determined to keep working to demonstrate that he was not old, too old to do that.

Neva, who stated that she was both mentally and physically lazy, had a more “laid back” approach to life. With regard to achievement or obtaining what one wanted, Neva believed,

It has to just happen. . . . When we seek too hard, it’s like whatever we’re seeking is eluding us. You have to kind of like [she inhales a deep breath and exhales] big breath and come back and just be ready for whatever. . . . Well we know, I know, you know, at 78, that every day is pretty darn important. Today’s the day I live. So make it a good one, you know.

After our February meeting, Neva and I exchanged several e-mail messages in which she updated me on upcoming events such as the next cruise that she and Tally took. In one of our exchanges, I asked Neva why, after Peter died, she had moved her computer into her *bedroom* rather than to the ‘public’ area. She e-mailed her thinking on the matter and her e-mail revealed her comfort with the medium and its particular language.

I was reluctant 2 have my computer in the middle of my living room (where it eventually wound up BEING!) because I thot it “ruined” the “décor!” Oh, well. I must say it’s convenient out here! I think the computer (4 me) is reminiscent of the early days of TV. We didn’t have a TV 4 a long time . . . 4 many reasons (one being I thot it would rob the children of their creativity, inventiveness & outdoor playtime), but I thot they were ugly ‘n would destroy the “décor!!” Anyhoo, TV is blatantly located in the living room (And the bedroom . . . tho’ I seldom watch it!) & so is the computer!! Ah, Progress!!

**Insights:** Neva had made considerable computing progress since my first visit with her, when she had only tentatively used e-mail on her new laptop-in-a-drawer. She was comfortable with more terminology, knew a search engine from a browser, and could install software such as AOL without too much fuss. Her current computer placement reflected Neva’s growing confidence in her use of it; a confidence abetted by Tally.

Neva’s husband had attempted to stave off growing old by working hard at what was already familiar—his medical practice. Neva tried to avoid the perils of aging by tackling something new, remaining “ready for whatever.” At first a lonely widow, she fell in love for a second time and experienced the rejuvenation of romance. Once again a couple, Neva was coming out to her community as her computer was coming out of its seclusion. Neva, skilled in the art of compromise, was softening her aesthetic concerns in favor of practicality—TVs and computers now allowed in the living room.



In **January, 2003**, I was in the Park for a brief stay and had time for only a short, **fourth** visit with Neva. She was continuing to enjoy the high life with Tally and told me about their previous evening at an indoor racetrack. Tally liked to gamble but “he never bets the farm,” she assured me. Neva declared that she was beginning to suspect that she had attention deficit disorder and was feeling very distractible, going “from this little thing, to the next little thing to the next little thing.” She pointed out that she was so disorganized that she still had not put away her Christmas decorations. Her computer at that time was in a corner of her sunroom on an old desk of her husband’s and Neva showed me a project she was working on for Tally. He needed address labels for an index of golf collectors but the labels that Tally had bought did not line up with her brand of label template. I sat with Neva at her computer for three quarters of an hour, and we worked on the problem. We tried various formatting techniques, moved columns around, and tried to superimpose his label template over the one she used for her Christmas card addresses. I reminded Neva how to do a ‘select all’ command under the ‘edit’ menu and she kept forgetting to highlight the targeted area first. We couldn’t figure out how to eliminate a header in one of the cells and finally Neva commented that she didn’t “really have the patience for a lot of trial and error” and that there was always so much to remember. Finally, she concluded that she should have Tally buy a different brand of labels to match hers. Neva had not been doing very much on the Internet but she told me that she was enjoying keeping up with her high school girlfriends through e-mail.

**Insights:** Neva reported that she was losing patience and focus for some tasks, including computing. She had not taken the time to practice or master some basic skills associated with processing documents *or* she hadn’t realized that she could transfer the skills she had learned for letters to other types of documents like labels. She was, in any case, still attempting to use the technology, prompted at least by Tally’s needs.

Seven months later in **July, 2003**, I was able to enjoy a more leisurely visit with Neva; this was our **fifth meeting**. She first wanted to show me some pictures from her recent steamboat cruise up the Mississippi with Tally. She phoned him and he soon dropped off the packets of photos at her cottage on his way to the Assembly Building for a game of poker in the club he had started. Neva confessed that she hadn’t been to the Computer Club in a long time. “Of course,

when Tally and I started hanging out, I kind of lost Computer Club.” But she wanted to show me the “Rube Goldberg” set up she then had for computing.

Well I had a laptop and the screen went out. So Tally got me the monitor. . . . Well, then my son-in-law decided I should not have that finger mouse; I should have a real mouse. So he brought me a mouse and a keyboard. . . . So, he’s a genius, literally. . . . So now I have a mouse, a keyboard, a monitor and a laptop, which is my computer. So one of these days, if I live long enough, I may buy a real computer . . . and a desk.

Neva explained that she really needed a better arrangement for this hardware because she was straining her neck and shoulder with the current set up which was all right for Tally but not her. I concurred, noting how low she was seated in relation to the desk’s surface and I recommended a dropped keyboard. Tally “keeps saying he’s going to get a new one,” Neva observed, because his computer was obsolete and lacking storage but meanwhile he used the one at her place.

While we talked, Neva prepared a light lunch. We sat at her large, round table and continued our conversation, mentioning various mutual friends in the Park. She knew that our friend, Barbara Howard was doing the layout for the *Weekly Flyer* for the summer, and remarked that Barbara was “so smart.” When I said it was more a matter of just persevering at trial and error, Neva offered her usual self-assessment. “I suppose so. And I am so lazy. . . . I am, I really am. I mean, I do what I want to do and I think, ‘eh, I don’t want to do anymore.’ And I think that’s laziness. I don’t want to stretch.”

Knowing that Neva was more knowledgeable than she liked to acknowledge, I asked to summarize what her computer had done for her.

Oh, well, I think for one thing, I’ve reconnected with lots of friends. And that’s been fun and interesting. Because I am the worst correspondent on God’s green earth. I mean, I really am bad. I find it difficult to get thank you notes written. . . . But I’ll do e-mail. And I’ll go on there at night and if I get a note from somebody, I’ll respond. You can do it right now, and it’s done. And I think that’s been my greatest reward with it. . . .

We moved to Neva’s computer (with Windows ‘98) because she wanted to show me some of the cards she had made but she couldn’t immediately locate her saved files. “I make cards, I can’t find the program. Every now and then it switches itself around. Now why does it do that?” She had made a card “not too long ago” with a “nothing program” she had bought. “[It’s] Microsoft Greeting. It’s not the best in the world. . . . This happens to be the one that Cody [the Computer Club guest lecturer] taught.” Neva liked neither the cards nor the text in the program but since she composed her own limericks she made do. As she searched around her

desktop for her saved cards she now and then talked at her computer, commenting on it and herself.

Neva: Some of them I've used I can't find. . . . I've never found any of these things. And, if they're in there, I don't know where they are. And, I've looked different places. I'll show you some of the ones I've made. Tally thinks I'm ridiculous to keep these. 'Come on— [talking to the computer]— today very, very slow.' Moves like I do. Now, it's gone away again.

NL: There you go, in the documents folder.

Neva: There we go. I put everything in documents. Tally thinks that's ridiculous too. Yeah, when I've made cards for somebody. I keep that now. . . . And, see, like I have . . . stuff on documents here. See, you have to go through a bunch of stuff.

After looking at some of her cards, Neva opened her e-mail, which was supplied by an AOL disk, 5<sup>th</sup> version. She liked e-mail because “you can do that without going into the whole deal of the computer.” In addition to personal mail, Neva received some list postings including horoscope readings and “Dr. Weil stuff.” Neva suddenly became frustrated when her mail program closed unexpectedly due to an errant key stroke and she vented, “Oh dear . . . something went wrong . . . this stupid disk. I mean, who knows? Come on. . . . And then if you hit the wrong thing, like I did just then—.” We waited a few seconds for the program to restart and continued scrolling through her mailbox. Neva alternately complained and laughed about the many junk mail messages, “Well here, ‘improve sexual potency, 75% improvement.’ Now, I really need to order that.” I told Neva that at the recent Computer Club meeting, Cody Peabody had recommended that people upgrade to AOL 8+ because of its virus scanning and spam blocking features. The software, he had said would eliminate popup ad boxes and “cookies.” “Oh, see, I don't understand this ‘cookies’ thing,” Neva replied and after I explained it she nodded, “I figured there was something, yeah.” She described the many measures that her daughter and (“computer genius”) son-in-law took to maintain their privacy to try to avoid identify theft. They warned her repeatedly against online purchases but Neva had occasionally ignored this advice. She drew the line at paying bills online, she assured me. In fact, although Tally did “a lot of eBay” transactions, Neva used the Internet “really infrequently.”

Neva's Park friend who had taken Neva shopping for her laptop was an avid Photoshop user for her photographs and Neva once stated an interest in that as well. I asked her if she had pursued that.

Yeah. I'm just not particularly interested in that. She does a ton of stuff. . . . It takes so much time. . . . I don't move fast enough to have that kind of time. It really is time consuming. Even just taking the mail

[i.e., e-mail] off if you have a bunch of junk you don't want. That's time consuming . . . It's kind of like, 'Oh, well here's another toy.' I don't need any more.

Not only did Neva have electronic mail to sort through, she was also swamped with paper mail, especially newspaper advertisements. "There's so much garbage. I mean, compared to what I need or utilize, . . . I just throw away a ton of mail."

Neva was a pleasant conversant and two hours had quickly passed so I asked her the burning question.

NL: What's your prediction for your future with computers?

Neva: Oh golly. I don't even hardly think about it. My future with computers. I don't think I'm going anywhere with it. I enjoy what little bit I use. I think the computer is going to be like the telephone. I think anybody that doesn't have one is going to be out of the *comunicado*.

**Insights:** Neva's computer use reflected the ups and downs of many others in the Park who were not feeling very comfortable with this technology. Hers were classic complaints—inability to keep track of files, feeling inundated with junk mail, being stopped in one's tracks with one false move on the keyboard, feeling the need to conserve time and lack of familiarity with and/or forgetting computer-related jargon. Her praises were also typical—enjoyment of connection with family and friends both through e-mail and greeting card (CD-ROM) programs. Neva compared computers to telephones as a basic necessity for communicating. She was acknowledging the *impending* importance of their place in society and the need to become literate in their use so that she, unlike her husband, Peter, could keep in the stream of things.

Tally was a bon vivant with whom Neva enjoyed excursions and new kinds of activities like gambling. His influence on her computer use had been substituted for that of the Computer Club and its associated tutors like Cody Peabody. Since Tally was a knowledgeable and frequent computer user, Neva's computer placement and status were front and center due to Tally's frequent presence in her home. The downside of his use and presence was that her computer set up was not comfortable for her but she was trying to adapt to his needs.

On a pleasant **November day in 2005**, Neva welcomed me to her cottage for our **sixth meeting**. She was clad in black right down to her walking shoes with their "phoenix rising" designs. The splash of turquoise in her necklace and earrings was capped by her delicately feathered hairstyle. When I complimented her on the new, natural grey of her hair Neva remarked, "I got so tired of [coloring it]; I thought, why am I doing that?" We engaged in our

ritual of catching up on the events in her life since our meeting more than two years earlier. I commiserated with her over the loss of some of the magnificent Park flora due to the recent hurricane that had swept through the area. Although she and Tally had enjoyed more cruises in the Caribbean and other jaunts around the country, for the last ten months he had been receiving treatments for cancer. Neva had been spending much of her time transporting both of them back and forth to doctors and hospitals but they were trying to continue with normal activities, as well. Neva was planning to attend a new exhibit at the art museum in a nearby city, and Tally was working online exchanging poker chips with other collectors. Although Neva and Tally continued to use computers, they hadn't been attending Computer Club meetings regularly. Neva felt some regret about that, "I haven't been going for a long time and I'm kind of sorry I don't. I used to kind of enjoy at least . . . seeing everybody and going. But I haven't gone for a long time." I told Neva of the changes afoot at the club, now led by a resident who had a master's degree in computer science. He was trying to organize the membership into subgroups based on interest. Neva responded with mock alarm.

Neva: Oh dear me. That would be beyond me. Like my son-in-law—he put two desktops on this thing [i.e. her computer]. One is for Tally and one is for me. And we don't like the one that's for Tally, including Tally doesn't . . . So I just thought I'd experiment with it a little bit the other day. I don't go on the computer very often . . . So I thought well, I'll just see. I thought this really is designed for Tally. And I said [to myself] . . . you might like it if you try it. You can't put, you have to sign in on my computer because he has a lot of protection on it. My little laptop crashed.

NL: When you sign on you get yours and when he signs on, when he logs on, he gets his?

Neva: Oh, we don't have the choice. It decides which desktop comes up. It is slightly annoying. . . . The only way you can use the one that comes up that is his is to put 'cancel' when the thing comes up and asks for a password. I learned that if you hit 'cancel,' it comes back up again, and then of course what we usually do is hit 'start,' you know, go to 'restart' and then mine will come up. Sometimes. Sometimes it will come up again. And it's so slow. So that's why I don't spend much time on it. It seems to me like I spend most of my time waiting for something to happen. And I know it's slow, because I've saved so many of these cards that I made. And you know, they're nonsense. Who needs them?

NL: You can update, expand your memory.

Neva: I don't think I'd fiddle with this one. I think I'd rather . . . go back to a laptop again. I like the mouse. I like having the mouse and or maybe one of those thin monitors. Tally has one down at his place and we talked about moving that up here but moving things is . . . a major problem.

NL: . . . You haven't had time to do it because you've been running around . . . going to the doctor.

Neva: Maybe I'm just not that interested. I enjoy making these cards. I think that's fun. And I do a little bit of e-mail because I like to connect with my buddies back in [her home state.]

A computing task that Neva had been thinking about was the transfer of her saved greeting cards to disk storage in order to free up some space in her computer. A Park resident

had given her a box of diskettes but she didn't know how to get started. Had she never backed up anything, I asked Neva. "No, never have. I'm lazy. I really am just flat-out lazy." I suggested that we work on this together and Neva confessed that she no longer knew where the box was. Once it was located we sat down at her computer where she was chest high with the desk surface, a fact which she noted, "See how I do? This is all wrong for me. That's another reason why I don't like to go on the computer. I don't want to make a cripple out of myself." During the ensuing hour, I showed Neva how to save files to a disk and then how to delete them from her documents folder. I urged her to repeat the steps until she seemed to remember them and as she did so, she was obviously pleased when she could recall the steps, "then we go to—now don't tell me—then we go to 'file.' Then 'save as.'" With this step, Neva recalled her vo-tech computer class experience of seven years earlier.

I was so ashamed of the fact that I didn't know how to even turn on a computer, you know. So I went to that class. . . . And . . . when she was showing how [to save a new document]—always go to 'save as' not 'save.' 'Saaaaave as.' [Neva draws out the phrase] Isn't it funny how you remember those things from a little teacher like that.

Neva said that she should write down these steps, but got distracted from that. She preferred to read through her saved cards, sharing with me her limericks and the events that had inspired them. I drew her attention to the pie chart indicating available memory, a feature she had not noticed before. Neva was surprised to see how quickly the disk became full so we talked about the digital difference between text and graphics. Finally, we reversed all that we had done, practicing deleting, when Neva became uncertain as to a possibility that the disks had only been loaned to her.

At one point, Neva started talking to the computer screen: "'Ah, go away. You're bothering me. What are you doing to me?' I can't seem to get rid of stuff." I asked Neva what she was talking about and she pointed to the menu box on the screen, and said, "that thing keeps coming up and coming up." I explained to her that it was because she was pressing on the right side of her mouse. She laughed as she replied, "Oh, I didn't know it." We worked on more tasks including how to position the cursor to effect commands. Again, she said she should write down these lessons lest she forget.

Neva: Gee, I thought I'd remember that. I'm just as dumb as a doorknob.

NL: No, it just takes a few times doing it. There's just too many choices to remember it.

Neva: Oh, isn't it the truth!

One of the cards that Neva showed me was a thank-you to her daughter and son-in-law for the cell phone they had sent to her and Tally right after the recent storm. Her message included the words, “We are so happy with the cute little phone. Now we don’t ever need feel alone. . . . I’ve got a cell phone where I can run my mouth. We’re a modern American couple with phone clout.” Neva said she hadn’t used that phone much but anyway she was “loving it.” While we poked around on her computer, I remarked on a couple of new programs— on Tarot Cards and astrology— and she said one of her sons-in-law had installed those. Finally, I asked Neva to once again evaluate the computer’s function in her life.

Neva: Well, I find it easier to communicate. It’s more fun to communicate. . . . I like—it’s fun making these cards. . . . And I’m more apt to communicate. I used to be a dilettante about letter writing. And now I will write. It’s kind of fun to do that. . . . I made [a card] for my grandson the other day. I just felt in the mood. And I would never have sat down and written him a letter.

NL: And you custom tailor it. . . . And you don’t have to go to a store and shop for it. . . . And you have a post office . . . here. . . . Okay. What has [your computer] done for your brain or your mind?

Neva: Oh, I don’t know. Something needs to be done for it. I don’t know whether it’s done a whole lot for me that way. And I suppose it has. . . . Keeps you thinking. And you kind of have to pay attention, remember. I think it *has* helped.

NL: Of course, it would be impossible for any of us to know . . . but it’s reasonable to theorize that it’s been stimulating, made some new connections up there.

Neva: Yes. Yeah, I would think that . . . I could theorize that it has. I think it’s important to keep our brains working, especially as we age. Because we don’t want to get funky and lose our thought processes.

NL: Does this feel like it’s been a new language?

Neva: It does to me, yes, yes. Initially it did. I mean, now, it’s kind of become secondary. . . . You . . . know now what you’re talking about. But in the beginning . . . I used to sit there in computer class—and I didn’t have a computer—. And I would sit there in Computer Club and take down all these notes, you know. . . . I’ve always been such a note taker. . . . I took such copious notes that I didn’t know what I was talking about. And, of course, not being able from home to do it. Then, after I got the computer . . . I could come home and experiment. And I’ve never felt comfortable with banking online. . . . It seems to me that kind of puts you out there . . . I’ve ordered a couple of books . . . And . . . I’m not real comfortable with ordering.

Neva again described how one of her sons-in-law was exceedingly cautious about online security. He substituted her AOL mail server with a different company, which he trusted, but when it crashed her computer, Neva resumed AOL service. He had been the first person to tell Neva that “everything happened in India,” a claim that Tally refused to believe. (Neva verified that by asking the location of the next AOL help operator she encountered.) One of Neva’s daughters had recently become enthused about computers, having found a use for it organizing her Condo board duties. Previously, “she didn’t want a thing to do with it.” She had recently told

Neva, however, that she would now be able to do the annual Christmas newsletter that her mother had been doing for her. Another of Neva's daughters used a computer in her work and did not want it at home and a third daughter had even less contact with computers. Neva agreed with me that hers was an unusual situation with regard to generational technology use. I remarked that it was nice to be in the vanguard to which she replied,

Well, I like to keep my mind open. I like to be willing and ready to receive whatever's new. Some of it I may discard but I like to be open-minded enough to take a look at it, no matter what it is. The other day I . . . told someone that I was having acupuncture for this hip. And . . . one of the elderly ladies in the coffee shop . . . said, 'You're having what?! . . . Well I would never have it done.' And I said, 'Oh, I might have anything done.'

Somewhat 'out of the blue' Neva pronounced that she was "over antiques." She had once been "crazy about them," going around to all the junk shops, but no more. I asked her to clarify the 'over' part.

Well, I'm beginning to think I need to pare down. I need to simplify. And I have never really felt like doing that. . . . And I think part of that is because of Tally. I mean, see how I clutter? And it drives him absolutely crazy.

NL: It didn't bother Peter?

Neva: Oh no, he did the same thing to me. . . . And Peter didn't pay any attention. He didn't care. Anything I did was all right with him. [laughs]

NL: It seems . . . that when you're able to say that 'I'm over my antiques,' it represents . . . a point of maturity where you realize that acquiring isn't anymore relevant. . . . Having things is no longer needed to define you.

Neva: Yeah. That's what—I don't need to be defined by my things. Of course, things are still—like this old desk. Peter had it in the office. But, it's kind of like, I can get rid of that. . . .

Though I suggested that it was time for me to leave, Neva urged me to stay. Over elderberry tea we talked about her media consumption. She wasn't watching much TV (none, then, since the storm had knocked out cable reception) but occasionally enjoyed food shows and the series *Rome* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. Though Tally did not share her enthusiasm for the latter, she found it "hilarious" that the characters "say things that people only think, . . . [and] say them right out loud." Two books that Neva was reading were *Translucent Revolution* and *Medicine Wheel: Earth Astrology* which reflected her New Age interests as did the decorations she had hung in front of her windows—a "dream catcher," "medicine wheels," and mandalas.

Neva told me that it wasn't until she was in her 60s that she had a real job and that it took her that long to learn conscientiousness. She enrolled in a program of training in the practice of Pranayana breath work. It was in the last stages of being certified, at age 69, that she had the



stroke that paralyzed her entire right side. During Neva's period of recovery she trained her left hand to take over for the right one. And it was this training or skill that allowed Neva to accommodate herself to the use of Tally's left-handed mouse. "See, I do the computer [i.e. manipulate the mouse] with my non-dominant hand . . . because he's left handed. It's easier for him." We discussed the ways in which people could try to stimulate their brains. She had, for example, recently been trying to teach her left hand to write in cursive since she had only been able to master printing after the stroke. Regarding the benefits of crossword puzzles for brain stimulation, Neva was quite dubious.

I've never been—oh, when I was in college, I used to enjoy crossword puzzles. And then I just got tired of them. But, like I said, I'm lazy. And they have a language of their own. . . . It's very annoying to me. I think, 'that's not real.'—funny little words, you know. . . . It's not really a real word. It would be like knowing a lot of acronyms. . . . My aunt was a big crossword puzzle worker. . . . And she had then books on how to—And, of course, she was good at it. But she knew that goofy language.

Neva and I reluctantly brought our visit to a close with wishes for future reunions. And our paths crossed sooner than we expected. A few days later, while in the Park coffee shop, I encountered several of my acquaintances, including Neva, seated around one of the tiny tables chatting. I joined them and was introduced to one of the oldest women in the Park, age 103. She had been a financial planner and was, judging from her remarks, very astute. When the conversation turned to the use of computers, Neva turned to another woman in the group and asked her if she had ever met her husband, Peter. Since the woman hadn't, Neva described him in two sentences, "He said, 'I will go out of this world computer illiterate,' and he'd say it with a great deal of pride. And he did!" I asked Neva why she thought that people were afraid of computers. She offered this explanation.

Neva: I think it's . . . 'what do I know?' . . . if I think I can't do something, if I think it might be something that is too much of a challenge for me, I may run from it. . . . And then people think, 'Oh, I don't know if I can. I don't know if I'd be able to.' So they just—it's like I did with chemistry. I said, 'I don't think I can learn it.' And I never opened the book. . . . And then I could say, 'Well, I never opened the book. So that's why I flunked.' See? Not because I couldn't learn it, but because I—.

NL: So you're saying that if they never touch a computer, they . . . won't be faced with failing at it.

Neva: Exactly, exactly.

**Insights:** According to Neva, while her husband didn't pay attention to or care about what she did, her companion, Tally, apparently had an opinion about everything she did. This could be a matter of differing temperaments or the differing time periods in each person's life cycle. But, in any case, Neva, a skilled accommodater, was able to adapt to both these

approaches, a testament to her openness and emotional strength. Perhaps these were some of the traits that fostered her solo sallies into new technologies. She was willing to have a look at whatever came her way—from computers to cell phones. Neva’s assessment of the value of her computing at this point was that it made communication much easier and that *possibly* it helped with her thinking, attention, memory and cognition. On the down side, she spent “most of [her] time waiting for something to happen.”

Neva felt that she had learned sufficient computerese over the past six years to be able to focus on tasks she wanted to accomplish, rather than worry about the descriptive terms for each underlying function or what operating system she was using. Although, in reality, she seemed to know only a modicum of this language, she was able to more easily reveal her ignorance than in her initial stages of learning. With labels such as “dumb” and “lazy” Neva continued to disparage her intelligence and her effort but at some level, she was aware of the strategy she employed to protect her self-image. At the coffee shop chat she described it well—not to try is not to fail. Any lack of success could be attributed to lack of effort (laziness) rather than lack of intelligence.

Although Neva had made progress in her computing abilities since her start in 1999, the access to her computer had regressed to that earlier time period. She had been able to liberate her computer from the suppressing circumstances of a husband who was hostile to her interests bringing the machine out into the open following his death. However, by 2005 her use was again being suppressed when her companion—in conjunction with her extremely cautious son-in-law—had ‘locked up’ her computer with a password and a shared desktop neither of which she could predictably penetrate. In addition, the physical arrangement of her hardware, which favored her companion, was uncomfortable to the point of discouraging her use. Thus, Neva had experienced the extremes of living with one man who would not look at her computer to “hanging out” with another man whose computing life had insinuated itself, literally and figuratively, into hers.

There were other ironies involved with her companion’s involvement in the technology side of Neva’s life. On one hand, Tally expanded her computing by adding hardware to her set up, by providing a model of enthused computer use, and by openly sharing her interest. On the other hand, Neva never mentioned receiving the kind of help from him that she very much needed with the ABCs of computing; to the contrary, he had left it to her to puzzle out how to create a label file for him. And on a third and related hand, Tally’s presence in Neva’s life

weakened what had been a significant source of support for her—the Computer Club. In the course of their relationship, all of her free time was spent with him and the many activities they did together outside the Park. Neva no longer attended CC meetings and was losing the contact and the intensive interaction she had had with the members who had initially shored up her computing effort. What then would serve as her support if Tally were to succumb to his illness?

Neva was beginning to “pare down” her life, to simplify, to lay aside vanity and materialism—no more hair coloring, no more antiques. Whether this was inspired by the process of graceful aging, or by the prospect of Tally dying is difficult to know. While the fact of ill health is obviously built into romance among the elderly, the desire and need for companionship evidently overrides any rational calculations regarding potential health disasters. Neva was very likely going to experience the heartache of losing two ‘mates.’ We cannot know, in balance, whether the pain of losing significant others—which must surely increase with each passing year and each subsequent relationship—outweighs the benefits of the companionship. But it must be asked, how many times can an elderly person serve as a caretaker? Several months after my departure from the Park, I was notified in an e-mail from Barbara Howard that Neva’s companion, Tally, had succumbed to cancer and died.

In **October, 2008**, I learned while in the Park, that Neva Evans was out of town visiting one of her daughters. She had conveyed this in a “blanket” e-mail which our mutual friend, Barbara Howard, found in her inbox. Upon her return, Neva learned from the note I had left at her cottage that I had hoped to visit with her. However, by then, I had left the Park. A few days later, I found a message from Neva on my home answering machine. She spoke slowly and in a beautiful tone,

Well, hi there lovely lady. This is Neva Evans. I am so sorry I missed you. I was in Kentucky. I just got home today and I had a wonderful time, saw the leaves turn and it was just delightful. And the weather was wonderful, it couldn’t have been better. Anyway, I had a lovely time but I’m very sorry if I’ve missed you altogether. I am back home now and if you’re still in the area, please call me. My phone number as you may well know is xxx and it’s Neva Evans. Please call me. Bye-bye.

Before I had a chance to return her call, Neva called and left a second, similar message, which galvanized me into contacting her and arranging a time to talk by phone. In an hour’s conversation, we covered the three-year period of our news lacunae. This was our **seventh conversation**.

Shortly after Neva's return from her vacation she had a routine medical test and immediately thereafter contracted the flu, from which she had a long recovery period. She suspected that she picked up the "germ" at the medical facility and declared that would be her last screening test. She was still quite fatigued and hadn't yet resumed her regular regimen of walking and exercising at the Park fitness sessions where she did stretch, strength, circuit training, and arthritis, workouts. "They're about several times a week and if I go to every one of those, I walk better, I think clearer, I feel better and it's just amazing what a little bit that is and yet it is so important to do."

A major holiday season was just around the corner when we spoke and Neva said that it was at this time of year that she most missed her two deceased mates, Peter and Tally (who had died several months after I last saw Neva). "Somehow this year seemed even more melancholy. . . . Maybe it has to do with my age, I don't know." Neva had plans to spend a few days over Christmas with her oldest daughter and remarked that this would be the first year in her life that she was not going to put up a tree or any Xmas decorations in her home. Since Tally died, Neva had not gone on any more cruises or major vacations nor did she plan to. Although she agreed it was arduous to do on her own, she continued to fly to visit her children. I asked her if she still had her car.

Neva: Yes, I'm still driving. I take myself to the dentist and the doctors, the grocery store, not any place very interesting.

NL: Still, having that mobility, that makes all the difference.

Neva: Oh yes it does. I don't know how much longer I will drive. I'm 85 now and I think I'm still driving all right. I don't drive at night; what if I get stuck someplace?

Fortunately bus transportation was customarily arranged for travel to events in the surrounding area. In the preceding weeks Neva had gone on a tour of area homes decorated for the holidays and was planning to attend a vocal concert soon. She had just returned from the annual Park Holiday Sale, which was run by residents who contributed personal belongings and baked goods for sale.

When I remarked that she was gone from the Park during the elections Neva said that she had "voted absentee." Neva's voice became animated as we shared our views on those political events. Neva "didn't like Obama at first" and was "so disappointed when Hillary didn't get it." She watched "absolutely every spec" of both conventions, and found the Democratic one to be "such fun" and the Republican one quite the opposite. But she had since grown to like Obama,

his family and his “brilliance.” For much of her marriage, Neva apparently downplayed her life-long Democratic Party affiliation because her husband was a Republican.

It was kind of like you don’t want to fuss with your inmate. So I always kind of took a neutral stand and didn’t pay a whole lot of attention. . . . That has always been my way of handling anything that was uncomfortable—ignore it—which is not a very good way of handling it, but it’s my way.

After briefly discussing the subject of whether one of the political candidates was too old to serve and perhaps lacking some mental sharpness, Neva observed,

and we do lose--- I think if we don’t actually lose intellect or intelligence or thinking ability, we lose the energy it takes to keep it really alert and sharp and good. I know that I have and I think on many levels I feel pretty much the same upstairs but I know I’m not. And it’s not a very nice thought but I think we have to face that—.

Our conversation gradually turned to Neva’s technological devices and I asked her if she was doing anything with her digital camera about which she was once enthused.

Neva: Nothing. I even have the little thing that you develop them but it takes so much ink and it’s kind of like what a dumb thing to have bought that. I’m so nutty. So I’m not doing that kind of thing anymore.

NL: Did you learn how to get the photos out of your camera and on to your computer?

Neva: No, I don’t think it’s that complicated but I have never bothered to do it.

NL: So you can plug your camera directly into the printer and print them that way.

Neva: Yes. [But] . . . as I said, it’s so much simpler to get the little [throw away] camera that you get and you turn it in and they give you pictures. I like that.

The cell phone that Neva’s daughter had given her in 2005, had been replaced with a new one as a result of a change in service providers.

The one I have now has a camera and I’m no more interested in that camera than I could fly to the moon because I about—I’ve never gotten around—. I did get a digital camera but I still don’t do that and I don’t fiddle with the computer and with the—[printer]. I do what I have to do and nothing more. I’m getting lazy.

To clarify my understanding of her statement, I asked, “So you’re not doing anything with your computer?”

Oh yes, oh yes. Well I do e-mail, of course. I’ve—I do stuff, a few things on the Internet. I look up stuff, sometimes I read the news there. But I don’t do a lot because I just don’t have the time. I don’t have the energy and I am chairing the Keep Well Committee and this coming up will be my third year as the chairman. So I send the minutes through e-mail, but I have about . . . three or four members that do not compute . . . out of twelve members and two honoraries. And Barbara, of course, has been my secretary. Barbara Howard, she is just a remarkable lady and next year she said she can’t do that anymore and I said, ‘Well that’s fine but . . . you can come on—’ And she said, ‘No, I can’t do anything on the committee.’ Well, I said, ‘Come on as our honorary. You mean too much to us just to leave us.’ So she agreed to do that, but she’s not going to be my secretary.

As I pressed Neva for more details with regard to sending documents via e-mail I was pleased to learn that our previous practice sessions had stayed with her.

Neva: . . . Barbara sends them to me and then I go over them and, you know, and if there's any corrections or changes or anything that needs to be added—and then I send them on to the members.

NL: How?

Neva: Through e-mail.

NL: In the body of the mail?

Neva: Right. Well I do, I have Word so I—I go up—I have to think how I do it. Anyway I go up to—anyhow, I send it, you know, from the Internet.

NL: So you send as an attachment? [No], so you type it into the e-mail?

Neva: Yes and that was difficult for me. I just use, I go up to—what is it—to 'edit', I guess, and then I come down and first I highlight it and then I go to edit and then I go to 'file' I guess, or maybe it's back up to edit.

NL: Maybe you copy and paste.

Neva: Yeah, copy and paste and send. And it goes out to the members.

The in-coming committee members who did not use computers or e-mail were going to complicate Neva's duties to share committee reports and news.

Neva: One woman, she's very sharp and she's coming on the committee next year, and she said, 'Well, I hate to admit it but,' she said, 'when I quit working,' she said, 'I stepped away from the computer and said, I am done.' and so she doesn't have it. Another one has never had it and she's a very bright woman. She's way smarter than I am, she and I have been friends for over fifty years and she refuses to get a computer.

NL: Because?

Neva: Because she doesn't want one. . . . I don't know, well, I guess she just doesn't want to fool with it.

NL: Yeah, it's a lot to learn.

Neva: It is and I think it's overwhelming if you've never done it. Because I can remember when I first started and that's been what, ten years. Just about ten years ago. In '99 I got my computer . . . it was before Peter died and I couldn't get him to even look at it. He said 'I'm not interested; I'm going out of this world computer illiterate.' And I said, 'you'll enjoy it,' I said, 'come and see what—you can look up all these things.' And he was so interested in news and politics and all that kind of—. 'No,' he said, 'I like doing it with the newspaper and television.' So, he wouldn't even look. So anyway, he never did it. And I look at Barbara and here she is even getting a new one and struggling with it and I'm like hmm—.

It occurred to me that Neva should be archiving or saving her documents for the committee and I asked her about that. She explained why she continued to reply on paper copies of data.

NL: Since you have these important documents from your committee have you learned how to back up things?

Neva: No, I don't back up. I know I should but I don't. I just save it and hope it—

NL: . . . stays there. Have you heard about these little thumb memory things, these little memory sticks, keys—they call them different things.

Neva: No.

NL: [I explain its function in more detail and conclude,] And it's just the size of your finger and they range in cost depending on how much memory they have, from like \$20 up, but it's very convenient and so easy to use as a backup thing.

Neva: Is it? Well I just, I just don't fiddle with that because I have, you know, I do the paper thing. You're gonna' have to have paper anyway and as I say, I have three members who do not compute.

Other than for this Committee duty, I wondered how often Neva used e-mail.

It depends on how I feel. When I was sick, I didn't turn it on for about ten days. And I had I think over six hundred. I finally got them down to about three hundred and last night I think I got it down to about two hundred seventy five and I thought 'I can't do this.' I don't open them all because some of it's nonsense and some of it's just stuff that they send you and so I just go down through—delete, delete, delete, delete. And I have not defragged. I hate to admit this. I haven't defragged forever.

What, besides e-mail messages, were Neva's sources for news, and current events? She still subscribed to the local paper on four weekend days and as for TV, apart from her mainstay of CNN, she reported, "I don't watch that much television. . . . I move so slowly anymore that I don't have time to watch a lot of television. By the time I do what I need to do." Nor was she finding online news the solution for staying informed.

NL: You said you read some news on your computer; what news media is that?

Neva: I don't know, whatever the current thing of the day [is]. But now I don't as much because now, you know, I have to do that flash thing and I can't seem to get that to work.

NL: What's that?

Neva: I don't know, it's this plug in, flash plug in and I'm like, 'Oh, I don't know how to do that.'

NL: So when you are going to sites, it tells you, you need that.

Neva: Yeah, and I don't like that. I don't know even how to get that to work.

NL: You're right, there are all these new applications that they keep inventing to give—

Neva: And I hate that. I'm kind of like, why don't they leave us alone? They think it's new but it's more trouble.

NL: Yes, it's just a constant learning—

Neva: Well it is, it is and I think it's, as I say, you get lazy and I know we shouldn't because we have to keep our minds alert and working. So it's easier with the newspaper.

From the beginning days of the Park Computer Club, all members were encouraged by the co-founders and the visiting tutor to use AOL as their mail program (and eventual Internet

browser) so that everyone would be ‘on the same page.’ Over the past ten years their steadfast loyalty to AOL had become a subject for teasing and debate by outsiders (relatives, visiting researcher, other residents) who repeatedly suggested that there were other options. So I had to ask:

NL: Are you still on AOL?

Neva: Yes [laughs]. Yes, I’m too lazy to do anything else. Isn’t that awful?

NL: You really aren’t lazy.

Neva: Well, I’d like to think I’m not, but I have to admit that frequently I am. As things change it’s so annoying to me because I don’t want to have to [bother] with learning all these new things. It’s kind of like, ‘Oh no, I had that down pat and I don’t want to have to aggravate myself.’

Neva had not returned to Computer Club meetings. “Somehow I just haven’t been able to get over there.” She did, however, continue to receive their meeting agendas via e-mail because, in her view, she still was a member. When I mentioned that the upcoming meeting would cover the memory devices about which we were earlier speaking, Neva said she might go but then remembered a conflicting concert at that time. I suggested that I could ask George Brinkley, the Club head, to repeat the topic at another meeting. About George she said, “He’s been helpful to me. I haven’t had him come over for a long time. I’m almost ashamed of how lazy I’ve been about keeping up.” Regarding computer helpers, Neva also sang the praises of Sturgis Johnson, Barbara Howard’s main tutor, who apparently had also helped Neva at home. When I told her that a few of the original Club members had given up computing because they were devoting their energy to other things they needed to do, she commented, “just getting up and getting dressed and feeding yourself.” Reminiscing about the early days of the Club, Neva related an anecdote about Albert Swenson, one of the co-founders of the Club. She described how he and his wife came to a club meeting and brought their 55<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary cake for all to share even though they were only on the waiting list to become Park residents. Neva also recalled her own history with the Club and computing.

Neva: And that was when I used to go all the time. That was before I had a computer. And I used to go all the time just to listen and kind of thought, ‘I’ll never learn that.’ And then I took lessons out at that Vo-Tech school and I thought ‘Well, it’s not that tough, at least I can turn it on and turn it off. Well, that’s something.’

NL: You have done so much. . . . You don’t appreciate how much you have done—

Neva: Well I should do more. I should, as I said, you need to keep doing—

NL: Well, you do. I guess the bottom line is you do what you need to do.



Neva: That's right, that's right. And I communicate with several friends from high school. We e-mail now and then. . . . And then I have one friend, she and I get on the telephone—but she gave up her computer a good while ago and I always thought, 'gee, [she] is so smart' but she said she didn't want to bother with it. Her son had brought it to her and set it up for her and everything and she said, 'Ah! I don't wanna' do it.'

NL: Maybe the desire has to come from the individual to do it like it did from you. It wasn't as though your children brought it to you.'

Neva: Right, right. Yeah, I really wanted to do it. And I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to. I thought [lowering her voice to a whisper] 'Maybe I'm not smart enough.' So that's why I sneaked over to Computer Club right from the very beginning when they first started—When Don first started the computer club I was going.

NL: And why did you really want to do it?

Neva: Oh, I don't know. It just seemed like I needed to do that. Everybody was doing it. Not everybody but a lot of people were and they seemed to be having, getting so much out of it and I thought that's just something I need to learn to do. And I figured it was going to be like the telephone. If we don't learn it so that we can use it—

It was only when I mentioned the name of one of the early Club members, Nelson Jones (then legally blind), that Neva told me of a favorite computer pastime which she had never before mentioned. She confessed that, like Nelson, she was a Free Cell (a variant of the card game, Solitaire) addict.

Yeah I hate myself. Now you can only allow yourself to play one game, then maybe two. No, one, maybe two, until finally I talked myself into two and sometimes three. But after—sometime after I've done something on the computer, I think, 'Well this relaxes me.' I'll play two Solitaire and one—But I have to win of course. I can't quit without winning.

NL: And those are the only games you play?

Neva: Yeah those are the only ones. I think that's enough. I don't need to introduce myself to any more.

At our meeting, in 2005, Neva had demonstrated how, for a number of reasons, her computer was difficult for her to use. I asked if that had changed and whether she continued with her major source of creative enjoyment.

NL: Are you still doing your greetings cards with your verses on the computer?

Neva: I haven't for a while because I got a new program that goes with this computer and I just said, I've gotten too lazy . . .

NL: In 2005, your son-in-law had installed a desktop for you and a desktop for Tally and you were annoyed because it didn't always come up to be yours and then you had to go through some machinations to get to yours. Is that still the same?

Neva: No, no, I have—after Tally died that computer that he built for me, which was an IBM, kind of gave up the ghost. So I got a new Dell which is not so new anymore. It's now, what—Well Tally's been gone, let's see, he died in 2006 and we're coming up on nine [i.e. 2009] so this computer will be three years old. It doesn't take them long to become obsolete.

NL: Did you have to get—what was your operating system? That's a Windows what?

Neva: What is it? '90? Must be 2000. . . . I don't know. It's not the one that's causing Barbara almost to drink. . . . She got a new one and it just nearly freaked her out.

NL: She's using Vista.

Neva: Yes, and she doesn't like that Vista at all.

NL: So you got yours just before they switched to Vista?

Neva: I did and I'm so glad that I did and I hope that it will hold up as long as I'm going—I'll only need it—. I have to get through this year with this committee and then it doesn't matter.

Due to her son-in-law's continual warnings of the possible dangers, Neva still did not conduct many commercial transactions on the Internet. The one of her three daughters who had gotten onboard the computer bandwagon in 2005 was continuing her explorations and had purchased Neva's recent airline ticket online. Still, as I reminded Neva she had been—unlike many other Seniors in the Park—ahead of her children in this technology for many years.

Neva: I started computing long before they did, yeah.

NL: You were ahead of the trend.

Neva: I try to keep up but I'm about to lose my energy around keeping up. It's just almost kind of like—pardon my expression—it's kind of like, 'Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn.' And I do—and that's aggravating too because I do care and I do want to do it and I find it frustrating that they keep changing things on me.

NL: Yes, we all do. I mean whether it's your phone service, whether it's the computing program—

Neva: Like you say, 'are you still on AOL?' Yes, because I don't want to have to deal with getting all the different—the nuances that come with the new services.

Returning to her earlier description of her Park friends who refused to use computers, Neva told me of a communications break-through of a different sort for one of them.

She is so smart, much smarter than I am. She doesn't have a computer. Doesn't have one, doesn't want one, doesn't intend to get one. She did finally get her telephone to answer. She got a new telephone that answers when she's not home, which is a big step for her.

NL: You mean an answering machine?

Neva: Yes, she finally got an answering machine. . . . When her husband died her niece was here and they took her out . . . and said, 'you're going to get a new telephone and you need an answering machine.' So she got that. That made me very happy.

And, finally, I wanted to know what had become of Neva's computer set up in the wake of Tally's death. Since she believed that they were ugly, had she moved her computer again for

aesthetic reasons? She assured me that his desk arrangement remained, as it had been, in her main living space although somewhat hidden.

Neva: . . . I still have that little corner over there that I use for computing and it makes kind of a tiny little office area which is always torn up and when I have company I think, 'Gee I hope they can't see over there.' And if I think they can, I hide stuff and then I have to go and sort out what I've hidden and hope I haven't hidden any bills.

NL: You could put a Japanese screen there.

Neva: Well, actually the desk serves as a screen, so that's kind of nice. . . .

NL: What's so fascinating about you Neva, is how your computer has moved, how it has migrated through your house to all its various locations.

Neva: It kind of has. It went from the living room [desk drawer] to the bedroom to the front room. And my neighbor next door has planted a tree. It has been a very great help to me because when I turn my computer on in the daytime, usually the sun blinds it. But now that tree has grown up large enough to [create] a shadow so I have a little shade there. I have no blinds or anything on my window because I want to look right out.

As we were saying our good byes at the end of our phone conversation, Neva and I had this exchange on the subject of information.

Neva: I wish you were on tap because I have a lot of questions.

NL: Do you do Google searches at all?

Neva: No, I don't. I know I should.

NL: Well if you don't need the information, then there is no 'should' to it.

Neva: I could use information.

NL: About what?

Neva: About anything. I lack a lot of information. About all I know at this point is my name.

NL: Every time I do a Google search, I am amazed at what is available out there in cyber space.

Neva: I know. I did, not long ago, I wanted to remind myself of the Buddhist, you know, the four—oh gee, I can't even say it—the 'four noble truths' and all that. So I looked that up not long ago.

NL: On Google?

Neva: On Google.

NL: Did you find the information you needed?

Neva: Oh yeah, oh yeah. And anything you want, there it is.

As before, I urged Neva to call me anytime she encountered a problem and promised I would try to help her, or we could just chat. She said she just might do that.

**Epilogue:** In December I received a beautifully hand-written letter in which Neva thanked me for a small gift I had sent to her and wished me a good holiday season. Her letter started, “Thank you—you have (almost!) spurred me on to begin to accomplish something on my computer besides ‘Solitaire’ and ‘Free cell, e-mail—.”

In the latter half of May, 2009, I sent an e-mail to Neva to ask her the age of her friend who had recently acquired an answering machine. I was also curious to learn if she was interested in communicating electronically. Two days later, Neva sent a reply, explaining that she was preparing for the annual Health Conference—“a pretty big deal”—with which her Keep Well Committee was enlisted to help. She promised to get back to me the following week and added:

I’ve become SO lazy about all that new stuff with the computer. . . . I think it’s part of the ‘aging process,’ as Peter used to tell his poor little patients. [After a little more news of residents, she closed,] Come to the Park to see . . . us old codgers. . . . Love, Neva.

Neva replied a little less than two weeks later to my initial question. Her reply repeated the feelings she had expressed during our telephone conversation a few months earlier.

My friend, [xx], got a telephone ‘that works,’ and her niece programmed in her answering machine just before her 80th birthday. She’s very bright—WAY smarter than I am—but she does not have, nor does she want or intend to get, a computer! She’s on my Keep Well Committee, and she’s a great worker, very dependable, but I have to send her messages by ‘Park mail,’ which I type (computer) and fold and ‘mess with,’ all because she and three other committee members refuse to ‘compute!’ It does simplify my life when I can send messages about the committee through e-mail!

My husband used to proudly say, ‘I plan to leave this world computer illiterate!’ And he did! But that was ten years & 6 mo. ago! I must say, though, that I don’t do much with this thing, because, as I’ve already informed you, I am lazy! . . . NE

I soon found myself on one of Neva’s lists of forwarded mail recipients and started to receive several messages a week. Neva had several categories of mail she forwarded: jokes about the foibles of men; patriotic, support the troops messages; feel good ‘I care about you/friend/beautiful woman’ messages that people were urged to forward to others and New Age kinds of subjects. One feel-good message wove in computing technology.

Special Hello from my computer to yours—Hello there, nice person. Did Anyone Ever Tell You, Just How Special You Are? The Light that You Emit Might even Light a Star. Did Anyone Ever Tell You that Many Times When They were Sad, Your E-mail made Them Smile a bit? In Fact It made Them Glad. For the Time You Spend Sending Things And Sharing whatever You Find, There are No Words to Thank You, But Somebody, Thinks You’re Fine. [Etc.]

Another message in this category compared old and new communication technologies,

cell phones versus the Bible—Ever wonder what would happen if we treated our Bible like we treat our cell phone? What if we carried it around in our purses or pockets? What if we flipped through it several time a

day? What if we turned back to go get it if we forgot it? What if we used it to receive messages from the text? What if we treated it like we couldn't live without it? What if we gave it to kids as gifts? [Etc.]

As I read these forwards, I noticed that Neva's mailing lists were of differing sizes (three, eighteen, twenty-two, twenty six, thirty four addresses) which prompted my inquiry in early June, 2009. "I notice that your mailing lists for your various jokes differ quite a bit. Do you edit the list of recipients each time you mail things?!!!!" She replied,

Hi, Norma. . . I'm pretty selective about what I forward . . . I get so much stuff, and from so far and wide, that I don't even look at all of it (some I just delete), and I imagine it's the same with you. . . When are you coming back to 'Th' Farm' (Flamingo Park, that is)?

In another mail that same day, I commented further,

So, is it safe to conclude that you've been resending whatever mail you find interesting to your various friends for quite a while?! If so, you are more accomplished with regard to your computer use than you would have people believe. OR have you taken over Al's role as 'mailman?' Won't be going to Sunlanda during the summer months, for sure.

Neva responded with alacrity, still on that day. In a second paragraphs she declared,

Oh, no. . . I will NEVER take over for Al!! Though I thought him a remarkable man (he took such good care of Dottie, his wife) several years ago I asked him to only send me 'information,' so I seldom heard from him. I forward very little of the volumes of stuff I get!!!!

No, Norma, I'm not 'computer accomplished,' nor do I WANT to be. . . it's a 'time-thief!'

This mail was titled, "More nonsense conversation," and ended: "Nice day! Long note!"

Towards the end of June I wrote Neva and, among other things, mentioned that a place I had recently visited made a deep impact on me. I also wished her good sleeping, after describing my sleepless nights in a recent heat wave.

Hi, Norma. . . I do sleep VERY well. . . my problem is getting myself to bed at night! Either I stay up and bake, or read, or what I'm doing as I write! Every morning I say, 'tonight, body, I promise, tonight. . . !' But, now it's 'tonight,' and here I am. . . I believe I'm hopeless!!

The environment, or energy, in some places affect us more than others—New Mexico affected me in a very profound way. . . maybe it has something to do with the 'vibes' in certain locales. I'm sorry, guess I'm a little 'New Age,' but I do believe that our bodies and minds respond in different ways when the energy in certain locales hits us where 'we live!'

Commenting that I was happy to hear that she was active and busy, Neva agreed that she was enjoying "tearing around hither and thither" and ended on her usual upbeat note:

Love hearing from you . . . come to 'th' farm!' (FP) when you can arrange it! Neva.

Neva has continued, to date (Fall, 2009), to forward to me various e-mails of interest.

**Insights:** At age 85, Neva was once again living alone in her beautiful cottage on the pond. Her close companion, Tally, had died shortly after my last visit with her but she was

carefully nurturing her body, mind and spirit, striving to remain in good health. Neva like Barbara was well aware of the benefits of physical exercise for mental acuity (see, for example, Hawkins, Kramer and Capaldi 1992, for research findings on this subject), probably reading about such research in the health-related publications to which she subscribed. She was fit enough to still travel on her own to visit family and was relying on them for holiday cheer. Neva continued to enjoy the mobility that her car afforded although she limited that to daytime driving. She remained fully engaged in activities inside and outside of the Park. She had taken on the responsibility of committee work which no doubt pleased some of the Park residents who thought that she and Tally had lived a frivolous existence, failing to contribute to the Park well-being through volunteer work.

Just prior to our telephone conversation, Neva had been ill and was still feeling sub-par and not even up to her customary baking for the annual Park Bazaar. Thus it may have been a continuing fatigue that caused her to emphasize her general tiredness or it may have been related to cognitive slowing (which she acknowledged) or perhaps the ever more pressing ratio of time spent versus time left. Whatever the cause, Neva did express a greater sense than before of being worn out and lacking energy. This was the prevalent theme with regard to her computer use—she lacked the energy to keep up with the changing technology. She summoned her old ‘friend’ “laziness” more than ever as a rationale for opting out.

Keeping up with rapidly changing technology was even more daunting in the absence of a live-in computer tutor or the moral support of the original Computer Club members. The Club, as currently configured, was of little interest to Neva. The leadership had changed, it was more business-like, the approach was one of division into specialty groups, she knew far fewer members and its climate was no longer one of a warm blanket of fellowship. Neva did mention that three of the informal Park tutors had helped her at home in the past but each of them had long lists of people desiring their assistance.

She was unable to access some websites due to “flash things” and “plug ins” and similarly had lost her creative outlet due to changing card-making programs. Whereas in previous years, Neva had mentioned the “fun” of card making, the only positive word she used in conjunction with computing in our conversation was “relax” in relation to the two card games she played. By contrast, she repeatedly referred to not wanting to fiddle, fuss or bother with technological changes or tasks. She emphasized time concerns, calling the computer a “time

thief.” Neva expressed a reluctance to change, upgrade or update her computer because of the associated chore of new learning even if it might enhance an outcome. And she stated or evidenced a preference for some older, tried and true technologies such as throwaway cameras, newspapers and landline telephones.

And yet, Neva was frustrated by the inability of two of her Keep Well Committee members to use computers since it entailed more work for her. (It is worth noting that the computer use/non use among these members was not age-related. The non-users were much younger than Barbara Howard, who was in her mid 90s.) In fact, this committee exhibited an interesting mix of old and new technologies that may be more usual than exceptional. Barbara Howard wrote out notes of the committee proceedings by hand. Then she typed them up on her home computer and printed out a hard copy. She took this paper copy to Neva who then typed its contents into the body of the e-mails she would send to those committee members who had computers. The others received (photo copied?) paper copies via the Park mail service. Because neither Barbara nor Neva knew how to attach a file to an e-mail, there were several in-between steps. It’s curious that none of the Park tutors such as Barbara’s main helper, Sturgis, had been called upon or inspired to show them this step. But, as with many things, it’s rarely that simple, since another missing link in the learning chain was their inability to consistently keep track of where their documents were stored.

What then were Neva’s strongest skills on her computer? E-mail was at the top of the list and within that context she was able to generate a number of lists of recipients for forwarding messages. Card making had been a frequent activity (until she purchased a new computer and could not figure out how to use the new software for that endeavor). Neva could do online searches without having to know what search engine she was using and she had succeeded in using Amazon book ordering services in the past. Although Neva once alluded to doing word processing to create her daughter’s annual Xmas letter, her ability with that program had never been fully revealed. Thinking about the ease with which Neva did e-mail led me to rethink the issue of the “AOL groupies,” as someone once called the early Computer Club members. The rationale for using the same mail server, AOL, was to facilitate the task of the tutors, to be able to talk about a single program at Club meetings and in home sessions. With Neva’s use, I realized that it served a better end—it afforded her continuity. Over the years of using AOL, she could recognize its features and grow her use along with theirs (although she did resist upgrading

to successive versions) or at least recognize their interface no matter what browser or search engine lay beneath it. Thus, AOL provided Neva with a comfort zone in which she was able to continue to function.

And, what, after a decade of computer use, did Neva cite as her reason for starting? Her own sense of intrigue and curiosity, the sense that it was or would be a skill as vital for communication as the telephone (a sentiment that she had earlier expressed) and peer influence—“everybody was doing it.” The realization that she had come to after ten years of effort was that using the technology effectively required more work and energy than she had to give to the endeavor. When, in Neva’s e-mail she declared that she was not “computer accomplished” nor did she want to be, I at first thought she was once again understating her abilities. Upon reflection, I concluded that she was giving an accurate assessment of her ability as well as the precise reason for not wishing to advance to a higher level of functioning. Computers are time thieves.

**General Discussion:** Neva’s philosophy—of being open and receptive to new things (as evidenced, for one thing, by her willingness to pursue a new avocation in her 60s), provided the underpinnings for her exploration of new I-C technologies. With no prompting from family members and in the face of doubt and suspicion of some of them, she took on the technology alone. With regard to her computer use, communication was *it*, first to last; that was her primary and abiding interest, whether that was via e-mail or her snail mailed but computer created greeting cards. Even Neva’s practical work—such as the minutes for her Park committee—was handled via e-mail.

The technological journey made by Neva had a typical start but an atypical continuation. Like other older adults who are introduced to I-C technologies by younger family members, she was introduced to the computer through her grandson’s desire for one and her subsequent examination of it. Thereafter, however, she was on her own as her three daughters were not PC enthusiasts and none of her family passed any machines on to her. She agonized over what kind to buy and then over how to use it. To some extent, Neva had the ideal confluence of circumstances in which to pursue this interest. Though an only child, she was not a “loner,” as she once told me, and enjoyed being in the company of others. On the other hand, she also liked having “alone time” in which to “play.” In the late 1990s, Neva’s children were grown and living elsewhere and her husband continued to busy himself with work. Thus, she had the felicitous



combination of life experience in solitary exploration, the social skills to seek out the help and company of others as needed, the alone time afforded by her household composition, and the existence of the Park Computer Club. Even though she had to fend off the low-level hostility towards her “little fellow” at home, Neva chugged along with good humor and cheerfulness. Throughout a decade filled with the sorrow of deaths and the joy of romance, of illnesses and aging, Neva kept finding a place for her computers to reside. With the act of computing, she progressed some, she regressed some and all the while, she continued to communicate.

Some of Neva’s friends did not use computers and her comments about this fact always included her assessment that they were very smart and/or much smarter than she. She seemed to be saying that the use or nonuse of computers does not necessarily equate with native intelligence and that nonuse does not add up to stupidity. But I think there was more to this proposition for her. She believed that the use of computers requires intelligence. This idea has several ramifications. (1) If a person is smart, s/he might be expected to use computers and it’s a puzzle when s/he does not. (2) Using computers is a demonstration of intelligence and ability. This belief could provide the motivation to try to acquire computer skills and equipment. (3) Losing computing ability and failing at familiar computer tasks could indicate a loss of cognitive ability by the individual herself. This could have several consequences, such as, anxiety and depression or surrender and relief. A researcher, in his study of adult computer learners in Ireland, developed a “learning identity” construct the “ingredients” of which are “the essential experiences and feelings that people point to when they describe their rationale and actions as they move toward computer competence” (Casey 2009, 114). At the core of Neva Evans’ learning identity was the concept of lazy/laziness. Encircling that were the concepts of: dumb, stupid, not bright, nutty, “way less smart,” and ashamed (of ignorance). However she acquired this identity, Neva used it as a shield against being perceived as ignorant. Being lazy was equal to lack of effort and lack of effort protected the self from potential failure and being thought stupid, dumb or incompetent.

“Help”—both human and technological—isn’t always helpful. Neva’s son-in-law’s personal experience and outlook seem to have discouraged Neva’s more vigorous exploration of the Internet. On the other hand, his warnings may have saved her from the dangers not only of online fraud and misdeeds but also from computer viruses and wipeouts. His well-intended installation of Tally’s desktop onto Neva’s computer with the idea that they could share one

machine at her dwelling didn't work out well for Neva, who was sometimes blocked in her effort to get to her desktop. Her son-in-law's desire to protect Neva from identity theft by switching her to his preferred mail server became problematic when it overpowered her computing system and, possibly, constituted another learning challenge. That her card making had been stopped as a result of acquiring a new computer was a significant loss for Neva since that was a cherished means of contact with her friends and family members who did not use electronic mail.

By 2008, Neva had come full circle with computing, having no at-home support. And, as her physical stamina lessened her desire to work through computing challenges decreased. Simultaneously, computing technology and programs were speeding up and expanding and Neva found it daunting to try to keep up with the changes. She implied that she was feeling the physical and emotional cost of trying.

Neva's e-mail is an example of an artifact that may be examined for insights into technology use and production. To begin with, it is demonstration of computer use at a certain skill level. Further, as an example of the written rather than the spoken word, it reveals a different kind of thought process and filtering. Writing, as distinct from speech, affords an opportunity for syntax checking, for expression of opinions unfettered by the presence of live listeners, for more outlandish humor and so on. Neva's e-mail differed in style from her other communicative modes. In our in-person interactions she was the epitome of southern grace and ease, speaking and moving in a measured pace. Her hand written letter was in a script rich with flourishes and pleasingly spaced on decorated paper. Her e-mail by comparison, was snappier, more declarative, decisive, and succinct. The prose was in turn exuberant and whimsical with touches of piquant humor. She expressed informality in her use of "Th' Farm" as a name for the Park and in her use of the "old codgers" for herself and other Seniors. On the other hand, her punctuation and sentence structure were letter perfect. One element of Neva's e-mail messages was the same as her spoken word—her mantras (computer illiterate husband; lazy self) were included, front and center. The subjects of Neva's forwarded mail reflected her interests and concerns, such as, 'New Age' and holistic healing, safety, well-being, patriotism, respect for women and salty anecdotes. They also revealed something of her view of me as someone who was tolerant of a wide range of opinions including funky jokes. Though Neva adamantly denied it, she was in fact doing exactly what Al Swenson had done. She was re-distributing e-mail to

various lists of family and friends as an efficient (many at once) way to keep in touch; she was using “boilerplate messages.”

Like conventional greeting cards, these boilerplate messages serve to remind partners of each other’s existence and, as such, preserve a relationship as a potential resource for companionship, advice, or social support at some later time. (Boneva, Kraut and Frohlich 2001, 542)

And like Al, Neva used some of these pre-written essays and jokes to communicate her sentiments about technology. The positives of communicating computer to computer and the negatives of cell phones which in their over-use were preventing people from more salutary activity, are examples.

Neva’s oft-repeated, terse summation of her husband’s history with computing technologies (“My husband used to proudly say, ‘I plan to leave this world computer illiterate!’ And he did!”) was noteworthy. I theorize that it spoke of her disappointment that her husband was unwilling to keep up—keep up with societal changes, keep up with her, keep investing in their lives together. After a brief sally to a technology lecture designed for physicians, he would have nothing more to do with computers, refusing to even look at what she wanted to show him on her screen. To avoid unpleasant feelings between them, she kept her computer out of his line of sight. She had surmised that he was afraid of being found incompetent. Was it his fear or his obstinacy that decreased her respect for him? Or, was she proud of the fact that she had succeeded at something that he, despite his high status and apparent intellectual accomplishment, had not? Whatever underlay her preoccupation with this idea, these two sentences uttered so frequently had taken on the character of a chant. Her retelling of his behavior could be viewed as a “recurrent narrative” that revealed tensions in the social dynamics of the Evans’ household and the way in which “media devices are embedded in group routines, and what criteria justify presence and absence in different households” (Davenport, Higgins and Somerville 2000, 909).

For many, good reasons, Neva was happy to be living in Flamingo Park. She had a beautiful residence, many supportive friends and a sincere belief that the Park was devoted to her well-being. Several decades earlier, when she lived in a nearby town, she watched the Park being constructed and thought to herself that it would be a “lovely place for Seniors to live.” As community friends began years later to move to the Park, she grilled them repeatedly as to whether they really liked it. Even after she and her husband made the decision to move to the Park and had sold their house, Neva resisted the relocation. She described an exchange with him. “I don’t want to live over there with all those old people. And he said, ‘Well, honey, we are those

old people.' That was kind of a revelation." Neva laughed recalling that and said again that she had loved the Park from her first night. When her husband Peter died, she was bolstered by a cushion of community support which carried her through those dark days. She remained grateful.

## CHAPTER 7

### A PROFILE IN FRUSTRATION: LASLO UNTERWEG (AGED 79–88)

My first impressions of Laslo as recorded in my field notes of 1999 were:

Laslo's well-articulated ideas are spoken carefully with a slight (European) accent in a pleasant baritone. He has a medium build with an air of robustness and outdoor physicality. He appears in good health despite his preoccupation with his physical decline. His trenchant observations are laced with irony, some cynicism, and also ready laughter.

Although Laslo was born in an Eastern European country, he grew up in New York, to which his parents immigrated when he was a baby. He later spent a decade or so in the Midwest where, after attending an acclaimed private college, he worked in various scientific endeavors. In his initial career, he was a "research engineer" who invented a process of photo mechanically introducing color into radar applications. He then opened his own photography laboratory but after wrestling with governmental agencies over contractual agreements pertaining to applications for WWII efforts, he decided to retire early from his engineering and photography work. He built a boat and spent twenty years sailing coastal waters with his wife and their adopted African American son. By 1999, Laslo was living alone; his wife had died some time after their divorce and his son was living in another town and seldom visited Laslo.

Laslo had approached me at the Computer Club, in **1999** and asked to meet with me at his cottage; it was our **first meeting**. The most noteworthy feature of Laslo's living room was a large display of his photographs mounted above a couch. They extended to the ceiling with the top row tilted downward. In addition to his skills as a photographer, the photos reflected his intense interest in the sea, in boats, in the unclad female body and in nature. In an adjacent, enclosed patio, he had a large collection of audio equipment and many shelves of tools and supplies from his previous engineering work. On a desk at one end of the patio was his computer surrounded by piles of papers and books. Laslo had moved to Flamingo Park in 1997. The Park was in the middle of the price range of the retirement communities he had explored and although he was not entirely satisfied with its "ambience" he laughingly pointed out that it matched his own condition.

Well, what shall I say? It's not what one would necessarily choose if one were building it from scratch but—. Anyhow, I mean, as I get older, I'm not what I would design, myself, either.

After offering me a cold drink, Laslo invited me to be seated on his couch, he sat in an adjacent armchair, and we started to talk about his computing interests. He had had his computer

for only two months; it was an “eMachine.” Laslo told me that he had never touched a computer before his recent purchase and that his main research tool had been a slide rule. He explained his rationale for wanting to take on this new technology.

It used to be you’d read a financial magazine . . . and you’d get phone numbers. You used to read government articles . . . , you’d get the phone numbers. Now, all you get is ‘WWW.’ And I’m afraid that not being able to use this is being illiterate. Not just that one can’t do what others can do, but what one used to be able to do, will no longer be doable. . . . I want to be able to survive— . . . [T]he whole culture is absorbing this technology and assuming, taking it for granted. That’s a given. And if you don’t have it, you don’t have anything.

Why had Laslo only now bought a computer given the fact that he *and* the computer club had been in Flamingo Park for the previous two years, I asked. He had attended some club meetings but “couldn’t understand a thing.” Then Park administrators told him that they were bringing in a special computer instructor, Cody Peabody, whose flyer Laslo showed to me. It offered a “free computing for seniors seminar” and “one on one tutoring in plain, simple language.” The fee was \$30 per hour with a minimum of two hours per session. When Laslo could not make “much sense out of” the seminar he bought a computer. “[I] figured then I could understand and I still couldn’t.” So Cody Peabody encouraged him to take more classes but after spending \$200 Laslo lamented, “I still don’t understand what’s going on, to tell you the truth.” But he had acquired at least one skill, “I can play Solitaire.”

On the subject of his source for news, current events or other information, Laslo told me that he did not read newspapers because that took up too much of his day. He subscribed to one or two finance-related magazines but rarely listened to TV or the radio because of his poor hearing. He cited his lack of hearing as another reason for buying a computer. When I mentioned the existence of online news sources he said he was aware of them but wisely pointed out, “but first I’ve got to walk before I can run.” To my question about having an Internet connection, he revealed that he did not know but thought that he had e-mail through AOL for which he had just signed up. Was that the Internet he wondered?

When I asked Laslo to comment on the issue of whether digital technology such as the Internet would further democracy (a hot topic of that time) he expressed some rather bleak opinions about social inequality, oppressive school systems, impoverished governmental institutions and his worry about the formation of a technocracy which was ruled by a highly educated elite. He was equally unhappy about the state of libraries as a source of information.

I used to almost live in the library. . . . Our library has a computer system, SLIN [i.e. a statewide network of libraries] . . . And every year or so they have a presentation on how to use it and I go there. . . . About eight

times I've gone there and gotten more bewildered than before. . . . I don't know how to do that [i.e. use the computerized book search/retrieval system] and I think I do and I try and I get all ballsed up and I go to the index cards and [a librarian says] 'We don't have index cards.'

Eventually, we sat down at Laslo's computer and I asked him again what he wanted to do with it. Although he had only owned this device for some weeks, Laslo had already developed negative feelings about it. "I would hope that it can help me put some organization and order into my life. But I have serious doubts about that. I think it will just create more disorder." The aspects of his life that most concerned him were his investments and various tax issues and Laslo planned to use his computer to write letters and notes to himself.

I hope that the computer can somehow compensate for my flagging memory and my flagging hearing. . . . It's short term memory I lose particularly. And I'm hoping that this will help me. So far, it's just overburdened me further.

As we worked on some concrete tasks at his computer like how to use his e-mail program, I learned that Laslo was unschooled in many basics such as how to change the sizes of his window panes, how to scroll effectively, the necessity of typing an exact URL. Like many beginners he was overwhelmed by the amount of stimuli on the screen. He guessed that he was spending about six hours a day "trying to understand what I'm doing. Not succeeding." When I asked about help books, he told me that Cody Peabody had advised him to not buy any books but Laslo had done so anyway. I tried to reassure him by saying that as he moved back and forth between his computer and his texts, both of them would gradually make more sense. I compared it to a foreign language and said it would take time and practice to which he replied, "That's why I made this investment. I figured if other people can do it, then I can do it." While I continued to show Laslo various e-mail procedures, I used the phrase "being in control" which sparked the following diatribe by Laslo on a subject that he had briefly touched on earlier—frustration. He made some dire forecasts about the impact of computers.

Laslo: I talked about frustration begets aggressive behavior. Well, what we don't understand is the aggressive behavior could be externalized like in Columbine School or it could be internalized. And when it's internalized, this produces drinking patterns or drug abuse or spousal abuse. . . . The only way to cope with it is to toughen up and say, 'Well I'm a strong man.' And that doesn't work. And, I'm afraid the computer, the way it's going now, is making these pressures more—pressures greater and greater and frustrating the whole culture. And I'm afraid of what is going to happen because computers—. This is in its infancy. Is it going to turn us into a whole country of psychopaths? Or a whole world of psychopaths.

NL: You think? That's how frustrated you're feeling.

Laslo: Well . . . the only reason I don't feel so frustrated is I'm beginning to understand it. And I pity the people who can't even understand this. . . . and can't roll with the punch cause they don't even know where the punch is coming from.

NL: So you're suggesting that technology and computer technology in particular . . . may be creating more problems than it solves.

Laslo: It certainly is creating problems—whether quantitatively I can't say. I don't have a meter to measure these things. But no one seems to be addressing the fact that these problems are real and require study.

We had reached the noon hour and I left Laslo so that he could prepare his lunch. On the way out, he showed me how he had set up speakers all around the cottage which amplified his door bell. I remarked that he was managing very well with such survival strategies. He replied, “Yeah, but I've never been confronted with a computer before.”

**Insights:** Laslo's conversational style was that of a man of science. He reflected on and weighed his ideas with some care, trying to avoid speculation on matters about which he felt ill informed. With regard to the digital technology he was exploring, he was a reluctant experimenter who was acquiescing to social pressure. He did not wish to be illiterate or incompetent. As a scientist it was reasonable for Laslo to assume that a machine could apply logic and order to his life. What's more, other people appeared to be using it with no apparent difficulty. Although he didn't expressly say so, I believe that he was chagrined to find that his previous training as a chemical engineer, inventor and accomplished problem solver had not adequately prepared him for effective use (faster progress) of a personal computer. He was sufficiently disconcerted by this realization to project his frustration onto the larger society, predicting a national and, eventually, a global psychopathology. Laslo pointed to a profound truth concerning the *retrospective* impact of technology on former routines and learning methods.

Laslo's feeling of incompetence when confronted by the 'new' technological means of locating library books, was echoed by the majority of Park residents with whom I spoke. He tried harder than most others to crack the code of library automation, attending many programs designed to train patrons. In fact, Laslo was expending a great deal of energy—six hours a day—trying very hard to unravel the mysteries of computing. His ambivalence, though, was apparent. He thought himself up to the challenge of doing what he saw his fellow citizens doing but he was feeling very pressured in the attempt.

Fifteen months after our first visit I found the appearance of Laslo and his cottage basically unchanged during our **second meeting in August of 2000** except for one thing. He had moved his computer from his patio to one end of his living room, a more central location in his



home, but was it also more central in his life? Laslo was concerned at that time with his worsening eyesight due to macular degeneration. It was within that context I asked him why he was persisting with his computer. In a flash, we jumped right back into where our conversation had ended over a year earlier—on the topic of frustration. “It has a potential usefulness that might someday out shadow all of the frustration it’s causing me.” As a motivating force, he again mentioned seeing “kids doing the computer” and being directed by mass media to “learn more at WWW. And you can’t get it without the computer.” Then, Laslo repeated his theory about externalized and internalized frustration even stating that he stayed in bed so as to not have to confront computing and the attendant frustration. He claimed that a month earlier, he had looked for someone to whom to donate his machine which, he felt, had only one positive feature.

The only thing that saved my life was the fellow that set up my computer; he put Solitaire in there. After I was ten years old, I thought Solitaire was the stupidest game and anyone playing Solitaire must be a nit. . . . At least I know I can do something with the computer.

Contrary to my suggestion, Laslo said it wasn’t Solitaire to which he was addicted; it was *solace*. “Solitaire gives me a little solace to take my mind out of why this thing I’m trying to do isn’t working.” One of Laslo’s sources of frustration was the series of little things he was unable to fix such as the perpetual repositioning of his tool bar by the computer. He had had to call on the help of the (un?)official Park tutor, Cody Peabody, who sent an associate who after three hours succeeded only temporarily in fixing the problem. Laslo protested the \$90 charge and said that Peabody was cool towards him thereafter.

Laslo guesstimated that he was spending two to four hours a day at his computer, including time spent playing Solitaire, a fact that exasperated him.

I resent that I don’t have enough time and I’m wasting time on a Solitaire game that I would have thought so stupid. I would have thought anyone even thinking of doing it is stupid.

He had, of late, been trying to find worthwhile websites and trying to understand what search engines were and how they differed from browsers. I pointed out a new one to him called Google but Laslo said that he still preferred to use Alta Vista because he had heard me talking about it the year before at a Computer Club talk. When I mentioned something about “corrupted files” Laslo commented that he didn’t use files because he didn’t know how. I attempted to clarify for him the meaning and functions of search engines, searching strategies, browsers, files and operating systems which led Laslo to declare that I should move to the Park and become its tutor. Sitting side by side at his computer, Laslo and I also reviewed how to use scroll bars, ‘favorites,’

URL boxes and one of the most basic functions of all about which he said, “You saved my life by telling me [on a previous visit] about ‘enter.’ Before I was always trying to get this [cursor] in exactly the right square and then hitting it too much or too little.” I mentioned that these were tricks that he should expect to learn at any course, to which he replied,

You know, it may be that these things are said at the Computer Club. There’s a phrase in teaching, ‘telling is not selling.’ I find that if I get told something, I’ll even agree. But, later on when I need that, I can’t remember it.

I urged Laslo to not despair, counseling that the information would eventually stick and he observed, “No, I’m not despairing. I’m just thinking of how much of a life I could get by getting rid of this thing.” After listing the activities he would rather be doing—“sailing, making love, reading a book”—Laslo concluded that they were no longer feasible. He acceded to my suggestion that working with his computer helped to keep his brain stimulated but could think of no other reason to struggle with it. When I asked whether it helped him to keep up with things around him and to keep tied into the culture he reflected a bit before answering.

Laslo: I think no more so than it is useful as a way of not having to keep tied in because there’s all this distraction. Plus Solitaire. . . . In short, it could be that the computer takes me out of the life cycle as much as it helps to get me into it.

NL: Ah, the isolating factor.

Laslo: Yeah, yeah. It lets me be a computer hermit without having to cope with living.

NL: . . . some people . . . have a different form of contact with other people on the computer. So, they’re alone in their space but they’re actually connected with a whole bunch of people.

Laslo: Yeah, I don’t reach to anyone on the computer.

NL: You don’t do e-mail? Why is that?

Laslo: I don’t know what to do next.

In that last remark Laslo was referring specifically to his inability to navigate through interactive websites like one on annuities in which he had to fill in the boxes of a questionnaire and his choice inevitably became, “not one of those.” In a half a dozen tries at e-mailing, he had been stymied by a lack of replies either because he had typed the address incorrectly or the recipient was unresponsive. He concluded, “it’s frustrating because I know I’m doing something wrong.” As we looked through Laslo’s e-mail file together, we discovered quite a few messages from Al Swenson, co-director of the Computer Club as well as other club members. I helped Laslo practice various mail functions but when we tried to send a message, the hourglass that indicated

an ongoing function remained for an unusually long time. After several minutes, Laslo grew anxious and reluctant to continue waiting.

While trolling through Laslo's mail program and looking at a website or two, he told me about an ongoing problem that was bothering him—the unwanted intrusion of pornographic websites onto his computer screen. He realized that he was getting these because he had visited a few sites on “erotica” and, what's more, he understood the concept of “cookies” (“that there's some way that the computer can tell what I'm doing and lets other people put that information”). Laslo made sharp distinctions along aesthetic lines between “porn” and “erotica” and had repeatedly deleted the “garbage” ones but they'd eventually pop up again. He did not believe that any form of contact (e-mail, phone, letter) to those website owners would provide a successful opt out resolution. After a rather lengthy discussion of the matter, I asked Laslo if he was still visiting the erotica sites. “Oh, yeah. I have to keep up my computer skills,” he responded, chuckling.

We had been talking for several hours and as I arose to bring our meeting to a close, Laslo said that although he wanted to go to the Computer Club that night to hear my talk, he might not make it. He had scheduled an appointment with a young woman who might be able to help him better organize his affairs. However he managed to arrange it, Laslo did attend the Club meeting.

**Insights:** Laslo viewed the computer as the gateway to information and as a device, the use of which one needed to learn or risk being cut off from many sources of information contained in the WWW. On the other hand, his frustration had increased to the point of actually hiding (in bed) from the machine and the challenge. His progress was still occurring at the very basic level where the use of “enter” (the “return” key) was a major accomplishment. And it truly was an important accomplishment as a strategy for overcoming his inability to see well enough to place the cursor in an exact spot. Clearly, Laslo needed much more side-by-side help that was provided without the tension involved in payment for time. What other agents besides an interested researcher could assist him and other adult learners in that manner? In the ideal retirement community, technology training would exist along with other important social services and it would be broadly conceived. In the realm of info-communication, residents could obtain instruction in all manner of apparatuses and their programming— computers, answering machines, cell phones, WebTV, VCRs, Tivo and so on.

He continued to compare himself to “kids” and other members of the larger society who computed, but Laslo did not yet articulate any realization that many initial computer programs were made by and for teenage brains. He did, however, indirectly acknowledge the fact that without practice drills and readily available help, it was hard to commit new technological learning to short *or* long-term memory. In our conversation, I highlighted the difference between the training of computer scientists and information scientists as mediators for novice users and their computers and we agreed that it was the latter approach that was missing from Cody Peabody’s staff.

Laslo stated that he continued to have faith in his computer’s potential usefulness but he also pointed to the tension of the possibility for human connection versus the large amount of time spent in isolation while trying to learn the techniques for such connection. Not only were computers a distraction that prevented one from attending to societal concerns, time spent on learning how to use them constituted an avoidance of social congress, according to Laslo.

Without a personal element to it, e-mail continued to be of no interest to Laslo, and he was not motivated to learn how to use it. He did not appreciate the fact that Al Swenson’s word-a-day messages—however impersonal they may have seemed—were designed by Al as an exercise for Computer Club members in learning how to use the technology. On the other hand, Laslo had discovered a different motivation for using the Internet—the pleasure he found in viewing the female body that could be partially satisfied through his computer. Thus, erotica and Solitaire comprised his technological mainstays. But Laslo resented the fact that by playing that card game he was in his own eyes being reduced to his category of “stupid.”

It was seven months later, in **March, 2001** and Laslo and I were again seated at his computer in our usual places with him at the keyboard (although he always invited me to take his place) for our **third meeting**. His first remark was that he had come close to throwing the computer out of a window. He had also tried repositioning his desk and computer set up but concluded that there was the least glare where it was, at the end of his living room. For a few months, he had been exploring a website called “Telehealth” which he said was “fascinating sometimes and sometimes even useful.” More recently, however, he had been unable to find that site although he had searched. “I tried and I rummaged and I looked through books [i.e. his computer manuals] and I didn’t get anywhere and I says, ‘Oh, who needs it?!’” Laslo wanted

some help ordering his e-mail messages chronologically so we worked on that and I thanked him for the one e-mail he had sent me. He said that his program didn't work "part of the time" so he didn't bother with it; we found that he had over two hundred unopened messages. Laslo laughed heartily when I observed that his computer hadn't yet brought order into his life. "No way! Au contraire." he declared. And to my query on the subject he confessed that he was "more than ever" addicted to Solitaire.

What I like about Solitaire is that I can almost do it with my eyes shut. It gets me from being so angry and frustrated.

We continued to work on understanding Laslo's new e-mail program which was apparently Outlook Express. He had changed servers and wasn't quite sure how to get to the mail program. We explored the various features from address books to security issues, and Laslo was clearly overwhelmed. "It keeps changing and changing. I mean . . . whatever it's doing, keeps changing." He stated that he had to use one of his books to figure out how to execute a delete function "and then I find I haven't done it." For about forty-five minutes, I urged Laslo to repeat various functions hoping he could remember them later. Eventually, I said, "What's our next challenge?" to which Laslo replied, "Which window?" and I understood that he was not referring to anything inside or on his computer. I asked Laslo if he was still troubled by the appearance of unwanted sites and he said that he got "some pornography stuff and some Jesus stuff." As I wondered out loud about a possible connection, he remarked, "Yes, because without sex there wouldn't be religion."

Rather than travel down that road, I suggested that we try exploring some websites he might find useful and we looked at his 'favorites' list which contained many items most of which Laslo had not put there and that troubled him. I explained that computer operating systems were pre-programmed with such features and that we could delete what he didn't want. He chose to keep only an erotica website and one investment company site. As we worked on deleting the long list of favorites we made a discovery together—that placing the cursor on certain black text opened up a box with supplementary information whereas the same was not true for white text. Laslo was excited by this discovery.

Yeah, yeah, I see. I see. When my mouse is here, there's nothing to the right but when my mouse is on one of those black things it tells me there's more. Okay, okay, that's worth knowing. Okay, great. At least it tells me, 'Look a little more; maybe you'll find something.'

When I confessed to Laslo that I could barely see the tiny font on that feature, he described in considerable detail his visual limitations and the fact that macular degeneration so reduced his visual field that he could hardly get close enough to the screen to read it. Though I suggested all manner of visual magnifiers and aids, Laslo couldn't envision a solution that had no disadvantages.

What it amounts to is when I want to see, I just push that (sliding keyboard) in and I get up like this and Hey! That's okay. But then I can't type and I can't [press] 'enter.'

Pressing on, we together searched for, found and bookmarked a site called "telemedicine," and I helped Laslo distinguish between the URL box and the search box. After some more practice on the features we had been learning, Laslo suddenly exclaimed, "Norma, I just realized something. This is an immediate task for this box [i.e. the keyword search box]." He then spent the next ten minutes describing a gastro-intestinal health problem for which he had seen several doctors—a condition called *H Pylori*. I helped Laslo choose search terms for this topic, visit several websites, find a good white paper at the NIH website and print it out. We had shared two positive experiences with Laslo's computer and it seemed like the right moment to end our conversation for that day.

**Insights:** As Laslo's sensory (seeing, hearing) inputs weakened, the computing technology he was trying to learn was rapidly complexifying, which was a parallel track guaranteed to frustrate. Even as Laslo was pressing his face against the glass of his computer terminal, trying to read the words thereon, the programs therein were busy evolving and rearranging themselves. Laslo had identified the problem: "it keeps changing and changing." There was not enough time to catch up. It is unrealistic to expect mature learners to cope gracefully with continued, intense, and rapid change—in any context—let alone in the foreign territory of digital technology. What was the solace of the game of Solitaire which Laslo could almost play with his eyes shut? Although he felt it was beneath his intelligence level, it was an activity with life-long familiarity since he had played it as a child. It was comforting because he knew the rules and expected outcome and these didn't change.

Laslo continued to teeter between hope and hopelessness regarding the usefulness of this technology. When blocked, he turned to the protective protest of "Who needs it?!" But, then with just a small discovery, he became very enthused and willing to "look a little more" to find

something else. Laslo and I had succeeded in identifying and satisfying an urgent information need regarding his health. Would this encourage him to pursue computing more enthusiastically?

It had been nearly a year since Laslo and I last spoke. A few weeks before our **forth meeting in February, 2002**, he had fallen down the steps of a store and broken his wrist, which was in a cast. At he calmly described the horrors he endured after a two-day wait in an emergency room when a doctor re-broke and then set his arm with too little anesthetic. At home, he had rigged up his shower with a lanyard so that he could bathe himself. Given the sparse clothing he was wearing, it was apparent that dressing was difficult and a significant weight loss suggested that food preparation was also a challenge. Thus, I surmised that Laslo had not been able to do anything with his computer, but that was not entirely the case. “I’ve been playing Solitaire with the left hand,” he assured me. Laslo repeated what he had said during previous visits—that that game allayed his anger and frustration. Once I reminded Laslo of our medical website discovery during my previous visit, he launched into an impassioned description of another debacle with the GI doctor whose advice about repeating the antibiotic treatment he protested and then ignored. He was still trying to find the right, low fat diet. Eventually we talked about his computing.

There was one useful tool on Laslo’s computer that he had recently discovered and wanted to share with me—“undo.” And what was he having fun undoing? It was his mistakes on Solitaire. Apart from that, Laslo had only a tale of technological woe regarding his service provider, which was unresponsive to his attempts to communicate with them about services and rates. At his request, they discontinued his service but then continued to bill him. When he was subsequently unable to find the right modem for a connection to JUNO, he gave up on having an Internet connection. Laslo’s verdict after six months of un-connectedness? “I thought I’d miss it. Nah. I don’t miss it.” After declaring that the only thing of interest he had found on his computer was the function of undo he modified his assessment.

I may be exaggerating, but only for emphasis. I’m sure I found things . . . of interest. But to get them took more time than the value of the information that I got, or misinformation, as the case may be.

Laslo confirmed that he had never sought news on current events online and that he mainly did without any news except for a nightly TV program reporting on business. He had learned about the attack on the Twin Towers in NY, for example, while talking on the telephone

with a cousin in New Jersey and that had prompted him to turn on the TV. Laslo placed that attack in the context of “another religious war” and said that he was not at all concerned for his personal safety.

At 82 years, it doesn’t matter. . . . I’m ready to go. I mean I’ve reconciled myself to the inevitability of the trip. Whether I do it now or do it next year . . . doesn’t make that much difference.

Moving the conversation back to computing, I asked Laslo if there was any difference in his mind between the Web and the Internet and what he understood them to be.

I thought they were just synonymous. [It’s] a computer into which people can hook up to get what other people put into it. . . . I guess a computer network . . . I guess . . . the way to think of this is the whole world is a computer. I suppose I thought of myself as being part of that network too.

Then I asked him how e-mail fit into that vision. The subject aroused his ire.

I made so many mistakes with e-mail that I couldn’t rely on it at all so I stopped using it. . . . I suppose I’ve got some cognitive problems and I go to the Club and I try to get their lectures but I only understand one word out of—sometimes two words out of three and I come home not knowing really what I’ve learned.

Laslo admitted that even when he had an Internet connection that he never looked at his e-mail because apart from one or two messages from me there were no important or special people with whom to communicate. He acknowledged that had I not told him about my planned talk at the Computer Club that week (which he definitely wanted to attend), he wouldn’t have known about it because he couldn’t receive the e-mail notice sent out by Al Swenson. Despite that fact, Laslo remained disinclined to reconnect,

because I don’t know what’s going on. It seems to me that people that are most successful with the computer are those who either know everything forwards and backwards like Cody, or who know nothing and want to know nothing, and just know how to punch a few keys to get the results they want, with no in-betweens. . . . I’m in the in-betweens that doesn’t know what’s going on.

I told Laslo that I was searching for a metaphor to use at the Computer Club talk to clarify the meaning and relationship of the concepts, Internet, WWW, browser and e-mail for the members who had expressed their confusion about them to me. Did he think that I might use a comparison between black/white and color television transmission, for example? Being at heart an earnest scientist, Laslo complied with my request to consider the matter by giving me a fifty-minute detailed account of the physics of radio wave based media. It was a brilliant explanation and as his words surrounded me, I realized in short order the inadequacy of my analogy. A few of the topics he explained were: energy pulses, filters, color signal encoding, spectrum frequency bands, light rays, emulsion, synchronicity, vibrations, wave conversions, varying voltages, flyback circuits, scanning discs, cathode ray tubes, hot filaments, rotating lenses. . . .



In turn, I offered Laslo a repeat of the explanation I had shared with him on a previous visit about how the Internet and the WWW fit together. Laslo then put his finger on his problem.

I'm afraid you're not reaching me. The difficulty, I think, really is I don't have a feel for all these words. . . . When I read anything about that box [i.e. his computer], it uses words that have precise and significant meanings, and to me it's just a 'gizmo' . . . ; different words for gizmo or doodad. And I may have read the definitions; certainly in most cases I have. But I don't remember them all. They're not familiar. They don't come to my tongue or to the tip of my mind. If I use these often enough in conversation, I'll incorporate them into my thinking. But the fact that I don't use them in conversation means that to me they are just words about as meaningful as 'gizmo.'

While Laslo was speaking, the concept of "critical learning period" came to my mind and I mentioned the phrase to him. He was familiar with it and described it thusly,

At certain ages we have matured to the point where we're ready for a certain type of information. Reading is . . . best learned at a certain young age and is very difficult to learn after. It may be 11 years old or 20 years old, depending on who the authority is. Depending, I'm sure, on the individual too. I suspect that this trait varies quite a bit individually.

Laslo stated that language is particularly susceptible to such a critical period and I suggested that the new vocabulary of "computerese" could constitute a language learning challenge.

NL: You may . . . hear . . . 'web' and 'browser' ten thousand times and still not associate anything meaningful to it.

Laslo: You've grasped it perfectly. . . . I have two dictionaries . . . and I refer to them more and more with less and less significance. And I get my definition and two days later I have to look it up again. And I realize that I'm never going to remember it. It's not going to be come a working word. . . . I feel this cocoon around a few words. If I poke at it, I might . . . remember what they were. But I don't because I really felt in the end, 'Gee, these are not really meaningful words—to me, that is.'

NL: It didn't illuminate anything for you or add understanding.

Laslo: Right, right. And that also is not communication. I realize that this is a word I can't use with anyone else.

Laughing, Laslo added that there must be a "critical forgetting period," as well. Returning to the matter of whether or how Laslo was aware of the events of the day, I inadvertently learned that he had a relationship with a special lady friend who lived outside of the Park. It was she who had informed him of the Olympics then taking place, and as we discussed the issue of judging such events, Laslo's recollected that he had once served as a judge for photographic competitions as a young teenager. His fascination with photography manifested itself by the age of eight when he made camera lucidas to help him draw. With my encouragement, Laslo again described in great detail some of his inventions in color radar and showed me (declassified) photos of the military uses in identifying ground objects from planes. And, in talking about his work, Laslo mentioned in passing (as he had done briefly during an earlier visit) how a "reactionary"

assistant (whom he may have “goaded” once too often) found his liberalism to be “un-American,” reported him to the FBI and obtained his job.

Just then our conversation was interrupted by the arrival of workmen who were going to enlarge his patio room by four feet. This increase in living space had been mandated by some kind of local codes and Laslo was vexed because it meant moving his many file cabinets and shelves of tools into his living and bed rooms for about two months. He fretted about how he would be able to access the files and how the woman he had hired for three hours a week to work with his files would be able to find what she needed. Laslo told me it had taken him two years after moving into this cottage to organize his possessions. “And I don’t know if I have two years left.” Although we had returned to the subject of Laslo’s current ‘work’ he said he could not express it well but agreed with my suggestion that he meant bringing order, taking stock, making sense of his life. Did he feel that he grew wiser as he aged?

The wiser, the older I get, the more I forget. I learn but I also forget. And sometimes it seems that I’m learning less rapidly than I am forgetting.

Did he feel like a “Senior,” I asked.

No! No. Oh, there is political importance to it [i.e. the word and concept]. There is economic importance to it. There’s social importance to it. But no, I don’t feel it’s . . . very meaningful. It’s useful but I don’t identify as a Senior. . . . I remember myself as a construct.

Laslo paused while trying to bring to mind a word that the psychologist, Fritz Pearls, popularized. Like Laslo, I was momentarily unable to summon the concept I once knew quite well and it floated up to his consciousness first. “Gestalt!” he exclaimed.

Gestalt is the whole thing of itself. . . . In the Gestalt, Seniority is a tiny corner. In a picture of myself is myself at the age of four with buster brown bangs. School, college, work, play, sailing, diving. I suppose most important of all, loving.

On the subject of computing once again, I asked Laslo what he had been doing besides undoing Solitaire mistakes. He had learned, he reported, how to type a letter and to correct it—with only sporadic success. As we sat at his computer, he showed me an icon (labeled, “shortcut to formal letterhead”) that he had created through “trial and error.” He had been writing letters, the most recent of which was about a problem with hearing aids for which he had been improperly billed. However, since his arm was broken, he had been asking the “woman that helps me once a week” to type for him. Just before leaving, I helped Laslo explore the functions of various desktop icons about which he was curious and to practice the basic functions of copy, paste, highlight and undo. We did not succeed in finding a way with undo to reverse more than

one action in a sequence. While I ruminated on whether that option would be available in more advanced operating systems than Windows 95, he advised, “Well, don’t confuse me any further; . . . too many choices is no choice.”

**Insights:** If Solitaire had not been in his computer, Laslo probably would have given it away as he had threatened to do. He played Solitaire—even left-handedly—with a noteworthy dedication. There were hints in his remarks—about his trial and error work on generating letters—that suggested that he was approaching his computing with the same focus. This was a sign of progress compared with his reported use in our previous discussions. Laslo did not see it this way, however. If his vision about and goal for using computers was that he would be a part of the network of a computerized world, it is easy to understand his disappointment and anger about his perceived failure to attain that goal. That initial vision stood in sharp contrast to his current assessment of being in the discomfiting condition of limbo—the “in between” space that was non-existent in Laslo’s typology of computer users.

The concept of critical learning periods serves as a reasonable—if provisional—explanation for understanding the inability of some older learners to grasp the new concepts related to computing. The retention and efficient use of new concepts may well be a time-sensitive developmental matter. Further, in the absence of the opportunity to gradually, systematically and comprehensively learn the context and applications of digital technology, it is a staggering amount of new material to absorb through unguided trial and error. The vocabulary of computerese comprises not just the words used to describe its functions, but also the functions themselves, the set of actions and behaviors involved, such as the manual manipulations, the visual perceiving of objects on a lighted screen and a keyboard. Laslo wanted to bypass the words and labels—the meanings for which he could not remember—and just “punch a few keys” to get the results he wanted. His expectation was reasonable however many nautical miles from reality it might have been.

For the older individual, time is increasingly precious and not to be squandered. In Laslo’s opinion, the time he spent learning to compute was not commensurate with the results he obtained. At first glance, this seems an inarguable assessment particularly when the result is an observable product like information. How, though, can we readily measure to what extent his well-being was enhanced as a result of brain stimulation or the sense of satisfaction with at least occasional breakthroughs in the technological haze? Laslo was acutely aware that his sense of

well-being was dependent upon being productive even though he could not precisely define what he meant by that or by work. His description implied that it was some kind of brain work such as organizing his files whatever they may have contained. An interesting matter for speculation is to what extent Laslo's current notion of work and productivity were related to the bumpy road of his early work life in which his opportunity for productive contributions was cut short.

Laslo's forecast of death in two years and his stated readiness to die at any time was not uncommon among the residents of the Park. I heard many people—even those I did not know and in the most casual of conversations and by those who were not in apparent ill health—express their desire to go to sleep and not awaken. This was often stated with the rationale of having lived a full life. And, I suspect that many of these individuals were living alone and were lonely. Thus, I believed Laslo and did not protest his declarations. I was beginning to view these spoken sentiments as a kind of rehearsal or helpful preparation for the cessation of living.

It was ironic that by not having an Internet or se-mail connection, Laslo had cut himself out of not only a global loop but of even the local loop of information—the Computer Club. Although the club members were within walking distance of each other the co-director, Al Swenson, was intent on fostering computer literacy by communicating Club activities only by e-mail. In any case, Laslo did not attend meetings regularly due to poor hearing and his apparent discomfort in group settings.

Once again, another year had passed. Laslo and I had agreed by telephone to meet but the time was left open; it was **January, 2003** and we were meeting for the **fifth** time. At about 11 a.m. on a cool morning, I approached Laslo's cottage but soon learned that he was no longer living there. Eight months earlier he had moved to a place on the other side of the pond. As a result of the delays in the construction of his patio, the Park had offered to fix up another, slightly larger cottage. Laslo came to the door in his robe but when I suggested I'd return later he insisted that I stay and wait while he dressed. Classical music filled the room and as I looked around, I noticed the absence of his computer in the living room. Otherwise, he had arranged his wall photographs and furniture as before. Once dressed, Laslo took me around—first to his work/lab/spare room to show me the make-shift bed he had fixed up for his son should he ever decide to visit. It was a layer of foam rubber laid on top of several short file cabinets. Laslo reported that his son, then age 39, had been free of drugs for two years. But usually when he

came to Dry Springs he stayed with a friend in the area rather than with his father. Laslo assured me that I would be welcome to use this sleeping space anytime I might need it.

“Don’t break an arm to make it better,” was Laslo’s advice when I asked about his wrist (which he said was “okay”) as we continued the tour and looked at the enclosed sun porch where the only item of furniture was his desk and computer. The room had initially remained empty at the request of his lady friend who had planned to move in but after eight months of waiting, Laslo had set up his computer there. He used it, he said, to write an average of three letters a month and only at night to avoid the glare through the many windows. He continued to employ a woman to help with his business affairs three hours each week. Twenty minutes into my visit, Laslo said to me “You know, I’m in my eighties and you have to forgive me. I’ve been hoping all this time that your name would come back to me.” Chagrined that I had neglected to re-introduce myself upon my arrival, I stated my name and we got into a discussion about mnemonic devices. Laslo said that yes, he knew Bellini’s opera, “Norma,” but when I suggested that he could remember me as the Druidic priestess of that tale he replied that I had on too many clothes for that.

Taking my previous advice to get out and socialize more, Laslo had recently attended a Park Happy Hour after winning the entry fee in a raffle. He sat with a group of women who informed him that they were in the Red Hat society and one of them declared herself to be the “queen bee.” When Laslo replied, “Well, can I be a drone?” they told him “no men allowed.” Relating this incident prompted Laslo to declare Flamingo Park residents to be “among the most uncreative in the world.” Laslo naysaid other venues that I suggested for meeting people, such as the Dining Hall (fatty meals) or the Computer Club (“The only person I can hear is you.”). To my inquiry about his health he told me about the extraction of some bad teeth and his steadily decreasing vision which had recently caused him to nearly run into a mirror in the Park administrative offices. Laslo was sorely disappointed that I could not stay for one of our long talks and I promised that there would be time during my next visit.

**Insights:** Neglecting to announce my name in a drop by visit was an obvious lapse on my part and would have taxed the memory of anyone who hadn’t seen me for a year. Each time I talked with Laslo, I more keenly discerned the sadness and disappointment that he felt over his estrangement from his son, Leon. While others might wonder about the un-commodious nature of the sleeping quarters Laslo had set up for him, I put it in the context of his long years of

sleeping in the tight quarters of a boat. To Laslo, a row of file cabinets probably resembled the cabin bunk where Leon used to sleep.

In the previous year, Laslo had undergone two major traumas that were threatening to undermine any progress he might have made in the use of his computer. Moving is upsetting at any time of life but especially so as we age. Not only had Laslo's computer use been halted due to a broken arm, the move of his entire household was also seriously disruptive. It must have been tempting for him to rely on the help provided by his computing assistant. Added to those upsets, he experienced another set back in his tentative efforts to establish some friendships in the Park with the rebuff of the Red Hat ladies. Clearly, Laslo's humor was too salty for the average female resident of Flamingo Park. Without an Internet connection, Laslo did not have the access to erotic websites that had been an attraction of his computer and this may have been another factor that led to his waning use of it.

It was the first day of my two-day interview session with Laslo in **July, 2003**, during our **sixth** meeting. When I first entered his cottage, he put his arm around my shoulder and said, "I understand you're having a bad time lately." Apparently, he had been informed during my six-month absence from the Park about the relatively recent death of a very close family member of mine. He couldn't recall from whom he had heard about it as he expressed his sympathy. Several times as we talked while seated in our usual, adjacent seats, Laslo took my hands in his and again expressed his sadness, saying he "just didn't see how I could be going on." As for his state of health, he said that his arm was better but that he had had to have surgery to rearrange some tendons in his hands and a second surgery for a trigger thumb. His eyes were continuing to deteriorate. "I try to read some and I can't read . . . I gotta' spell out the words one at a time and by the time I get done with a sentence I don't remember what the subject . . . or what the predicate was."

Recently, a cousin from New Jersey had telephoned Laslo and asked if he was "still doing any computing." Laslo told him that he was not and within two weeks his cousin had sent him a Web TV like the one he had; it had arrived two days earlier. Therefore, Laslo was once again confronted with the problem of having to decide whether or not to use another new technological device as well as how to choose a service provider which he had been without for "years" (and which he felt still owed him a large sum of money). Laslo thought of at least one

reason for trying the WebTV, “I can use that in bed while laying down, with a remote keyboard rather than having to sit up here [i.e., on his “hard” computer chair].” Laslo had been “too busy” to bother with an Internet connection due to his intensive work on taxes and investments. He tried to articulate the challenge he had given up on. “I know all the things I’m forced to be able to do with the computer but I found all the things I could [do] with [a] computer needed two careers to be able to understand the computer aspect of it.”

Laslo had been working on how to arrange his affairs so that someone could manage them when he was no longer able to. He continued to rely on the same woman—a retired school teacher named Mary Jo—for assistance three hours a week. She was just then away on a month’s vacation and he was “accumulating some letters that she’s gotta’ take care of. I’m a little ashamed of myself that I’ve learned to lean on her rather than worry about it.” He was concerned about a time-sensitive letter he needed to have written to an investment firm. Several times I offered to type the letter for Laslo since there was an urgent deadline involved but he politely refused, saying. “Oh, I don’t need to—I enjoy your company. I don’t wanna’ mess it up with—.” While discussing his economic circumstances and timed payouts of annuities he said (as he had done a year earlier) that he didn’t know if he had two years left to live, citing his age of 83. (He later stated that his father had died at that same age.)

Talk of years left to live reminded Laslo of a recent interview he had seen on the public TV channel of Erica Jong whose new book dealt with topics such as evolution, the stress of childbirth, and female longevity. When he said that had inspired him to read her book, I asked if he had borrowed it from a local library. He had not because “it means driving, it means getting out in the heat, it means, uh, getting a book which I may not to able to read in time. And my reading has slowed down.” Laslo soon acknowledged that he was not supposed to be driving since he was legally blind but that he was able to renew his driver’s license because “they don’t test me.” He explained that his ability to drive depended on the lighting and in fact three years earlier he had bent two wheels of his car by driving onto a median curb that he hadn’t seen. He confessed to feeling guilty when he drove but without his car he’d have to stay home and “twiddle [his] thumbs.” Couldn’t the Park residents get together and car pool to places of interest, I wondered?

No, no, the residents donated money to buy new cars so they could be used to take us to doctors. And then it was said they’d take us anywhere else except that we’d have to pay . . . from \$15 to \$30 to go somewhere. . . . And the doctors visits were free. . . . They’ve got, I think, about six cars donated by the

residents. Except now they charge to take you to the doctor. . . . Uh, it starts at \$5 and goes and goes and goes . . . I don't even try to figure it out.

Flamingo Park had gone bankrupt once in the past, he told me, had changed hands and was renamed. He implied that he was not sure of its financial stability. He questioned the economic wisdom of their decision to build another high-rise given that the demand for Park residence seemed to be decreasing.

We returned to the subject of books and reading. Laslo said that he enjoyed fiction but had read very little over the past years. Whereas he used to read a book a day, his average was not even one a month.

I read very slowly. I used to read rapidly . . . I used to get impatient with people that wanted to read something to me. I would say, 'I can read it much faster than you can tell it.' Uh, not so anymore. I've got the . . . closed captioning on my TV. My hearing is poor and my vision is poor or [for] some other reasons—but I find I have trouble keeping up with them. And I look for commentators who can be as slow as what was his name? Ohh, I can't remember names.

Because Laslo had earlier repeated his previous year's forecast of possibly not living another two years, I revisited the question of what makes a person feel old and the labels people use for that state of being.

NL: Are you comfortable being called a 'Senior Citizen?'

Laslo: Oh, these things don't mean anything to me. My life is predicated on objectivity, not labels or words. . . . Objectivity means I am of an age where, I can't get an erection when I would like to. I am no chicken anymore (chuckles). I, uh, have a mind . . . I know it's not as keen as it once was but seems to be keen enough. And, uh, as long as it's pleasant I'd like to continue [i.e. to live] and when it stops being pleasant I'd like to be able to discontinue.

NL: . . . What does it mean to be old?

Laslo: I'm not old (chuckle).

NL: How will you know when you're old?

Laslo: I don't think I'll ever know.

NL: Okay, you don't think of yourself as old and you're not sure what constitutes being old 'cause you haven't gotten there yet.

Laslo: Losing your marbles is what's being old.

NL: Okay, what about the word, 'elderly?'

Laslo: Uh, okay, we need a word to describe people who are less [i.e. more] than young but yet who are not quite completely decrepitly ancient and 'elderly' is as good a word as any. Words are the sort of thing when it describes a person and that person gets to be that, that person doesn't wanna' use that word, thinks there's something wrong with the word . . . .

NL: . . . You're saying get rid of all the words.



Laslo: Oh, no [repeats eleven time]. I'm saying, get rid of . . . weasel words. Get rid of words that are used . . . to conceal rather than reveal.

I was attempting, I explained, to find a word that was both universally agreeable to and descriptive of the research population with which I was interacting in the Park.

Laslo: You mean people who are no longer eagerly seeking opportunities to learn. That describes me. [laughs] Okay, 'mature.' I think 'mature' is as good as any. . . . It's very susceptible to misinterpretation but I think you won't find a word that isn't. . . . Begin by defining 'mature' and then go on . . . That lets you use 'mature' or any other word you want. . . . You can't find one word that means the same thing to everyone.

Though I tried, I couldn't pin Laslo down to picking an age when it would make sense to start calling people 'old.' When I asked if there any health or life conditions by which we could say that a person was old, he offered, "slower than thirty miles an hour." Seeing that he was implacably committed to the notion that each case had to be considered individually, I tried a different tack.

NL: Well, what's the highest order of 'elderly, old, ancient?'

Laslo: Dead!

NL: Just before dead.

Laslo: Barely alive.

These words were, on that visit, so emotionally charged that our conversation dissolved into the intense reactions of laughter followed by tears. We then found ourselves talking about memory and how people picture their recollections. In an almost apologetic tone Laslo described what he regarded as a peculiarity of his brain.

Laslo: Actually, I don't think visually. . . . I remember it [i.e., visual material] as descriptive words. . . . I hate to admit this but at times when I was shopping with my mother and she'd get lost, I wouldn't recognize her coming back until she spoke. And . . . this is true not only of my mother, but of my girlfriends and possibly even my wife.

NL: . . . When I show up at your door, if I didn't speak and I didn't call you, you would not know who I was?

Laslo: Norma, I hate to say this, it's absolutely true. But I love you dearly. . . .

NL: So you don't have any facial recognition.

Laslo: That's the only reason I'm sharing it with you. . . .

I asked Laslo where his computer was and he showed me its same location on the sun porch. I noted that it was turned on and he said that he had done that in the event that I wanted to

use it for any reason. He replied in the negative to my question of whether he wanted to do anything on it at that time. Seeing that his computer/desk was still the only furniture there, I remarked that he hadn't yet acquired a roommate. Laslo said he feared that his lady friend would never become his roommate and that he needed one; having a girlfriend on weekends was not ideal. "Unless I can share it, it isn't happening. . . . I just find that I can't remember 'till the end of the week all the things I want to share."

As I was leaving, Laslo invited me to visit him again if I had the time while in the Park and I agreed to try.

Day 2. I did have time for a second visit with Laslo a few days later. I again thanked him for the offer of the use of his car during my stay; he had telephoned me shortly after our first talk to say he rarely used it and would be pleased if I would if the need arose. After serving me a cold drink, Laslo explained why he hadn't yet set up his WebTV. He had been busy devising a dehumidification system to deal with the results of a leak in the roof of the sun porch. I told him that I had a little theory to share with him.

NL: If you indeed have a brain that does not maintain visual imagery wouldn't it seem that a computer system would be difficult because it's all graphic now?

Laslo: Could be. I don't find computers doing all that people rave about. . . . I don't know I should say that I find life becomes more and more confusing when people use terms like CD. Certificate of Deposit . . . in a computer? NRA—National Recovery Act. No, it's National Rifleman Association. People are talking letters. They're not using words. They're not using sentences anymore. And, oh, I can decipher it, but I spend so much effort deciphering that I find, gee, it isn't worth the trouble listening. Because I do have to work hard to listen.

NL: . . . every five to ten years they co-opt the previous letters and put a new meaning to it. So you can't even commit it to memory.

Laslo: Yeah, absolutely. . . . So many letters come up, and I think I understand what they're talking about and I find it's not at all related. And I can look up—but you know my memory isn't all that good. And I can't remember a whole bunch of really meaningless things, things that aren't going to have much meaning for me.

NL: Yeah. And then the computer [technology] adapted a lot of former words or words that had former meanings and redefined them. So then that's tricky too.

Laslo agreed with me and went on to describe how these issues were compounded by his limited vision and hearing. He pointed out the lengths he had gone to, to improve the lighting in his cottage to compensate for his macular degeneration. He had mounted four commercially sized florescent tubes in every room.

Laslo: My nightlight in the bedroom is four florescent tubes . . . And with those I've been able to pretend I can still see. . . . It took all this, then I decide I don't need to read. I say that because I can read only, well,

at this distance. An inch further away, and I can't. An inch closer and I can't. But that's . . . the nature of macular degeneration. And the wonderful thing is, I can still read. And I can't read everything, but I can read what's important.

NL: So at the Computer Club, it was a combination of the low light . . . and the fact that you can't remember faces anyway. . . . None of us looked familiar.

Laslo: Nobody in the room looked familiar or unfamiliar. I can tell Don [the Computer Club's founder] because, well, he's squat and paunchy. I know his voice and of course, he involves me.

And he described again his auditory difficulties, first while taking a recent trip in a Park minibus to a doctor visit.

Laslo: They ask me questions and I don't know what they're saying. And they ask me again and I think I got a clue to what they're saying so I figure, well maybe if he says it again, I'll be able to catch it this time. And by now he's disgusted and he just says, 'Get in.'

NL: It shouldn't be that way, given where we are.

Laslo: It'll always be that way. It isn't as bad as it once was only because we now have hearing aids. And your diction is so clear. It's so easy for me to understand. It's why I'd almost like to cut your feet off so you can never leave.

NL: . . . Diction is a terrible problem. And people are more and more talking indistinctly.

Laslo: Yes, and more rapidly. Now the news folks, you know Walter Cronkite, used to be able to talk [slowly]. I thought it was dull and boring because he'd drag it out. . . . But now that's what I need. And now I can't get it. . . . I'm afraid that anything we get is constrained by the fact that broadcast time is money. Every minute there can be sold.

During my visit that year, another Park resident had told me about controversial, anti-establishment publications that some of the residents wrote and distributed to interested individuals. She said she believed that Laslo was in this group. He confirmed that he had asked to be put on the distribution list for the publications of two Park residents but stated that he didn't have a very high opinion of their writing which, he acknowledged, alarmed many residents.

Both these people are, I think, even more senile than I am. I think both of them have trouble understanding certain concepts. . . . They are both quite critical of Flamingo Park. And I think with good reason. But I don't think they show it very well. . . . [O]h, they will rant and rave about . . . 'so and so wasn't doing his job.' Well, you don't know what so-and-so does or what [his] job is and there's no way of really tracking it down and seeing how objective it is. And whether in fact it is more than just an old wife being as crabby as I am. . . . [They are] not only short on supporting evidence but not even stating what the problem is. . . . It's not quite name calling but it gets awfully close. . . .

[And] some of our residents feel that any criticism of Flamingo Park is a slap in the face to 'us good residents.' I . . . mean almost all, most of the people here seem to feel that any objective discussion of what's good or what's bad is automatically anti-establishment. I've never seen it this bad before. . . . It's easy to understand how it could be that these are people who have committed their last dollar in some cases to get in here. And don't know how long they can carry on. And they've been told about [a program] . . . where the charity of the other members is what will pay their bills in the future. [But] Flamingo Park—they have *Flamingo Park* obligations in the future. . . . And also that if Flamingo Park goes bankrupt again, what

happens? It has gone bankrupt once before. It had a different name then. . . . I had to go on a . . . three- year waiting list to get in here and now I'm told the waiting list is just about gone.

The Park administration was apparently well aware of the activities of the “subversives.”

And we have a *Weekly Flyer*, typically six pages, which occasionally sticks a finger in their eye. Says things about them, why we shouldn't listen to them. . . . And they take great pains not to specify a name but they take even greater pains to make sure we know who they're writing about.

As we discussed some of Laslo's misgivings about Flamingo Park, I mentioned its predominance of white residents and that I had been told that one of the apartments in the new high rise under construction had already been sold to a male couple, one of whom was an African American. I asked rhetorically why a gay couple or an African American individual would want to endure the uphill battle of living in Flamingo Park. Laslo laughed and said, “People embrace uphill battles.” He described his own personal battle when he tried to take a stance on racial equality by “living by example” and it hadn't been easy. At the age of forty, Laslo and his wife tried to adopt a baby but agencies declared that life on a boat was not a suitable environment for a child. When they were finally able to adopt a three-day old African American baby through a personal and medically-based network, state agents tried to obviate the adoption. Their position was that a high-ranking psychiatrist had proven that “any child would be better off raised in an orphanage than not knowing whether it is black or white.” Although repeatedly threatened by court action, Laslo and his wife apparently weathered that storm. After recounting his arguments with a large variety of institutional agents Laslo told me that over the years he had developed a philosophy to live by—“happiness is gratitude.”

These sentiments led me to remark that Flamingo Park rested heavily on its volunteer programs, and suggested that volunteering was a way for people to demonstrate their gratitude for their good fortunes. But Laslo found thorns in my rosy proposition, speculating that people volunteered for less than altruistic reasons. They did so to support “things that he or she believes are proper and correct, and . . . right thinking.” They lent their efforts, in other words, to maintain the status quo. Thus, “when anyone thinks differently, we could get more volunteers to put them down.” Laslo espoused a view of volunteerism (“people getting together under a common cause”) that was tantamount to vigilantism judging from his examples. I commented that he might be in danger of poisoning himself with such cynicism.

Laslo: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Certainly I have to accept that. Uh, this cynicism isn't something I have cultivated. It's part and parcel of the innate me.

NL: Yeah. Does it make you happy?

Laslo: No, no. But it doesn't make me unhappy. It is a part of me that questions everything I hear or read. . . . Well, life has beaten the shit out of me in no time. . . . But happiness is gratitude and it's done a lot for me.

Before abandoning the subject of volunteering and Laslo's attempts to find reasons to feel grateful, I suggested that he consider serving as a tutor for some of the staff members who were taking classes. I assured him that I was just throwing it out as an idea and that he needn't respond. He replied, "Yeah, yeah, I'm not seizing on it because I'm thinking of my son who needs tutoring if anyone did." We talked briefly, as I gathered my things and prepared to leave, about the difficulty of directing adult children down paths of our choosing. As he opened the door, Laslo reiterated that I was welcome to return any time.

**Insights:** Laslo was relying more and more on Mary Jo for the management of his affairs. What would be a safe prediction of Laslo's future involvement with computing technology? There was no compelling reason to suppose that the factors that interfered with his computing such as decreasing vision could be improved. Nor was it likely that his patience for mastering computerese would expand in coming years. It remained to be seen how his WebTV might abet his access to information and entertainment. He seemed intrigued by the idea of using a remote [hand-held command device] for computing functions, such as e-mail, from the comfort of a prone position. And only time would tell whether the double whammy of multiple hand/arm surgeries plus the moving of his household would become a significant turning point in the tentatively upward trajectory of Laslo's computer use.

In the absence of concrete details of what it means to be 'hard of hearing' and 'vision impaired' these phrases become glib diagnoses. In an effort to better understand these circumstances, a car manufacturer is reportedly "outfitting design engineers with suits that approximate the effects of aging . . . to get in touch with an older demographic" (Walker 2008, 4). Since many researchers do not have that opportunity, we are reliant on the descriptions of the individuals with these problems. Laslo's description of requiring massive amounts of light in his surroundings, of having to hold a text just so many inches from his eyes, of being forced to read so slowly that he forgot the first part of a sentence by the time he reached the end, of being nose-to-screen in order to read on his computer, of nearly running into mirrors and of being unable to orient himself on a roadway can serve as cogent glimpses into the reality of these conditions.

Similarly, when trying to interact with others verbally, Laslo found that few had the interest to repeat their utterances until he signaled understanding. He could read the reactions of annoyance and impatience in his would-be conversation partners. There is another aspect to Laslo's hearing problems in Flamingo Park and that is the employment of mostly non native-born workers. Some of them speak English with marked accents and some of them speak only the bare rudiments of English. Thus, communication difficulties in the Park were not uncommon and listening may have been "hard work" for others besides Laslo. An easy resolution for the hard of hearing is difficult to envision. Laslo's imagined—if bloody—means of capturing me, and my speech pattern (tonal range, diction and speed), is a measure of his despair over the paucity of human communication in his daily life.

Compared with a year earlier, Laslo's sanguinity regarding being labeled a 'Senior' member of his society was surprising. Whether this was an indication of mellowing or merely a momentary better mood is hard to know. However, his thoughts about the inappropriateness or impossibility of finding meaningful terms with which to identify a major portion of the population were instructive. As he pointed out, none of the conditions I posed (immobility, impaired cognition, lack of memory) or that he posed (loss of virility, loss of "marbles" or even lack of desire to learn) could be assigned solely to individuals of X number of years. Furthermore, it would be hasty and even unjust to assume an irreversibility of any state of being (short of death) for a given individual at a given time. Laslo's articulation in 2002 of his self-concept, in which the state of being old occupied only a "tiny corner" of his picture of his entire being, was a poetic reminder of how much more there is to a person's life than her/his later years. We often overlook the fact that the older a person is, the greater is the percentage of time s/he spent being younger.

Laslo's information about the former insolvency of Flamingo Park was news to me and provided a context for understanding some of its administrative decisions and financial chariness that were manifested in uncountable ways: the resources that had to be donated by the residents; the rising fees for everything, from transport to meals; the reluctance to provide access to new information technologies such as wireless dwellings and public computers; the reliance on residents' labor and money-raising events; the changing of former admission criteria such as minimum age, mental soundness and social status. It also helped to explain Laslo's worry about his own financial well-being. With regard to his place in the Park, I had to wonder about the

social fallout of being associated (even if not allied) with the “anti-establishment” sector of the population. This homogeneous community of 1000 people seemed too limited to be able to tolerate much dissent.

“Happiness is gratitude” is a guiding principle for living that I would readily ascribe to several of the Park residents whom I knew but Laslo would not have been one of them. Although I was beginning to see that Laslo’s omnipresent cynicism was but a heavy cloak surrounding an inner spirit of empathy, generosity and tender heartedness, I nevertheless would have anticipated a less rosy statement of a philosophy of life from him. He admitted that he often fell short of being either grateful or happy but insisted that this was what he lived by. Since Laslo’s expressed ideas regularly contradicted or undermined that principle, I could only conclude that I hadn’t yet come close to decoding the “construct” that was Laslo.

The length of time since I had last seen Laslo was exceptionally long—two years and four months; this was our **seventh meeting** and it was **November, 2005**.

Day 1. There had been many changes in his life during this time. The first thing Laslo had to report was, “My sweetheart passed away.” She had died three months earlier—possibly of an aneurysm. Though she had never moved into his cottage, they had continued seeing each other. I offered my sympathies and Laslo replied, “I’m at the point where losses are an everyday occurrence.” I asked about counseling and he said that there were no grief groups in the Park. I noted that Laslo who had been quite thin when his arm was broken had gained weight and looked healthier. He, however, was proud of having recently lost twelve pounds and thought it was a result of the exercising he had been doing twice a week in the “circle group” that met regularly in the Assembly Building. The exercises involved no machinery and took place seated. This was the most he could do because of a condition of “peripheral neuropathy” that was interfering with his ability to walk.

The second important news update was that a few weeks earlier, “I wiped out my car.” He hadn’t noticed some temporary blinking lights on the highway and ran into another car; no one was hurt. “It was probably time [i.e., to stop driving]; my vision is going too fast.” Laslo was then “looking into getting a scooter.” It would be like those in the supermarket that travel four miles an hour and could be driven on the sidewalk. He thought he might be able to make it to the store for groceries. “I’ve arranged for Meals on Wheels to shop for my groceries . . . But I get a

feeling that I shouldn't really be using this because I'm not indigent." I noted a third change and that was the new placement of Laslo's computer—from the sun porch to his living room. This was due to the leak in the roof just above his computer that had yet to be repaired. And, his helper, Mary Jo, was still coming each week for three hours.

There were other significant changes that affected not only Laslo but also Flamingo Park, Dry Springs and its surroundings. They were all suffering the ravages of a spate of dangerous storms in the preceding months. The Park residences had been without electrical power for two weeks and all services were not entirely restored. Needless to say, Laslo had many things to complain about including spoiled food, reduced hours of the Dining Hall, a bill for meals he hadn't eaten, a lack of air conditioning, no housekeeping service, a refusal of ice, a refusal of the use of a generator and a refusal of a rebate for lack of electrical service. What did he do without lights or refrigeration?

I had flashlights, used up the batteries for two flashlights. Flamingo Park was very generous. They brought me another flashlight with more batteries. I chewed my fingernails down to the elbow. I mean, what do I do with no lights? . . . Macular degeneration, I don't see well. I got to get to bed before nightfall. I got to . . . stay in bed until a little past dawn, or grope my way to the toilet and hope. Oh yes, also the toilet clogged up. And for two weeks, no toilet.

The Park pastor had, according to Laslo, been directed to go door to door to check on residents—with a quick 'hello/goodbye'—because the internal Park communication system of a closed cable channel was inoperative. It was that subject that led us to the most startling of Laslo's news flashes.

Laslo: My cable went out and it hasn't come back yet. And I don't have any broadband connection. So I'm using AOL and it gets a little too involved for me so I don't do much.

NL: When did you sign up for a broadband connection?

Laslo: Oh, when I bought this one [pointing to the computer]. This is a new eMachine.

NL: You who didn't use your computer at all has bought a new computer. . . . You cannot predict these things.

Laslo: Well, okay, my son stayed with me for a couple of months last year. . . . And when he was with me he really used the computer a lot. He's very hip on it, very motivated. And I thought, well the least I can do is give him my old machine. He liked it. . . . And Mary Jo, my assistant, kept disparaging that it didn't—denigrating the old machine. So I bought my son a new machine. So I bought two eMachines. And one of the pull buys with this machine was six months of Comcast broadband for only \$19 a month. So that's how I happened to get that.

During our ensuing conversation, Laslo tried to clear up some confusion as to the time frame of his son's visit while I tried to sort out the timing of the computer purchases and



concluded that it must have been in August of 2004. These facts seemed insignificant, however, in light of the other concerns besetting Laslo and his son, Leon (then in his early 40s). Leon often found employment difficult to secure because he was dependent on bus transportation due to a DUI on his driving record.

Laslo: And he thought by living with me, that I will pay for his DUI fines which I did. And then I will pay for some driver education, which I did. And then I will pay for the insurance. I mean, his DUI would have ran my insurance up by an extra \$3,000 a year. So I said, 'Well, this far I've gone. This far is okay. But anything beyond this is for you.' Because I knew . . . the next thing . . . he'd say, well, he needs his own car. And I . . . could have handled that, but the more I helped him the less he helped himself. It was obvious that he was drifting closer and closer—just showing up for meals or maybe not showing up for meals.

NL: Oh, he developed a social life elsewhere.

Laslo: Yeah, and the social life is going to look for a job except I don't think he went to look for a job sometimes. . . . Well, I don't know. He's a good kid. I love him. I try not to—.

NL: Based on what you told me before, this was a record breaking amount of time that you had spent together, living together. . . . And it seems like maybe it was a little more positive.

Laslo: I thought so, I thought it would be. . . . I had talked about this occasionally, the possibilities here. He was always very negative about it, primarily because he's got connections in the area and he knows how to get drugs here and he was afraid he will get back on crack [i.e. a form of cocaine]. Incidentally, he had been baptized into the Catholic Church. . . . Perhaps two years ago. . . . This is where he got the strength to stay off crack. I don't like the source but I can't quarrel with the result. For a year, he had lived in [another city] at the facility for addicts. And that was a Catholic sponsored thing. And I think what he likes most about the computer is he can look up these biblical things. . . . And I'm sure he thinks I'm bound for perdition. . . . Doesn't matter if he thinks that. It's keeping him off crack.

There was no point in mentioning that Laslo had been raised in the Catholic Church since I knew that he had a dim view of most religious institutions, and I didn't want to jump on board that train just then. Taking, instead, the technology track, I inquired about Laslo's current computer use having earlier noted that his machine was turned on. I learned that he had not, after all, abandoned his tried and true source of solace.

Laslo: When I have trouble sleeping, I go for Solitaire.

NL: Were you playing Solitaire last night? That's what you are now mainly using it for?

Laslo: Well, until I get broadband back, that's the only thing I got to use it for.

NL: Well, when you had broadband, what were you doing?

Laslo: Oh, looking up what I owe . . . and how to resolve some problems with charges that are inappropriate.

NL: Were you doing that by yourself?

Laslo: Sometimes. I got Mary Jo doing it and I followed her. . . . Or, girly shows sometimes.

NL: Oh, back to the good ole pornography, yeah.

Laslo: Well, this is one of those wonderful things about living, isn't it?

NL: No e-mail?

Laslo: No, I don't look at e-mail. . . . A cousin still tries to reach me through e-mail. I tell him I never look at it.

NL: So you don't care enough about keeping in touch with that person that way.

Laslo: I don't want to keep in touch with the whole world, to learn why I should buy halitosis something or other.

As to what other channels of communication Laslo could use, such as the telephone, he said that it depended on the "conversee." Young women with high voices were impossible to hear. And he believed that the recent storm had done "something" to the phone lines.

I remember when I was young and reading how the phone company is able to get twice as much use out of their telephone lines by clipping certain sounds that aren't necessary. Now it seems to me they're clipping certain sounds that *are* necessary. And I was trying to get a phone number . . . and I had 'information' on the line and they must have repeated that number at least ten times. And each time I wrote it down differently and each time there'd be a couple of digits missing. . . . I'm not sure of this, but I think they have simply deleted parts of it, it simply didn't come through and it's different parts for different things. . . . It's as though I'm talking to a scrambled telephone that only scrambles intermittently.

I suggested to Laslo that cellular phones were partly to blame because their connections and servers were not always reliable and that words dropped out. To be sure, Laslo had no intention of acquiring a cell phone because "then, I'd have to remember where it is." Apart from his visits to the exercise group, what social contact did Laslo have? "Oh, once or twice a month my son telephones me. I guess that's about it. . . . What do I do, build a new lover?" Now and then he did attend Park events, apparently, because he had intended on going to the recent dog show in the Assembly Building but "forgot all about it." Laslo told me that notwithstanding that he had had his leg mangled by his aunt's dog when he was four years old, he loved dogs.

I really think it it a shame that we are descended from apes rather than from dogs. I've raised dogs; I've had dogs. They're much more wonderful than people. They are not so self-involved. They are friendly for the sake of being friendly rather than for the sake of what you can do for them. They want to love you if you love them. . . . I've been less disappointed by dogs than by people.

What about the Computer Club—was that an activity that he still pursued? He had gone, he told me, to the most recent meeting but couldn't understand anyone. The audibility was worse in the Club's new meeting space.

Before . . . we used the [Assembly Building] room and Cody Peabody has a strong voice and he spurns the microphone. But at Highview Place, it's a larger room and he doesn't spurn the microphone and it's not intelligible anymore. [There's a] very poor fidelity sound system. And particularly so for people who can't hear well. I mean, it amplifies, it maximizes the hearing impediment.

It was time for me to leave and I promised Laslo that I would try to arrange another meeting after I returned from a brief trip. As was often the case, our parting ritual included a promise to try to communicate via e-mail, however doubtful about his ability to do so Laslo might have been.

Day 2, a week later. After a polite inquiry as to the condition of my wrist on which I was wearing a brace, Laslo brought me a glass of water and we assumed our usual positions on couch and armchair. Our first topic of conversation was what name Laslo might choose for himself in any story that I might write about him. Since I needed to assign pseudonyms in my study to preserve privacy, I could give him an opportunity to pick any other name that he liked. He recalled that in his childhood his [real] name “was a very unusual name in a country full of people that all had names like John or Tom . . . So [it] was a bit of a problem. . . . [T]his was compounded by the fact that my mother called me [a word used mainly for adult females in English]. But I’m way past that. Now a name doesn’t mean that much.” I told Laslo that out of several I had considered, I chose the name “Laslo” for him because it had an eastern European flavor. He said that was fine. “You stay with what you’ve got. It’s easy to remember. . . . I trust your intuition.” Then, I jumped right into the burning question.

NL: What have computers done for you? Your use of computers?

Laslo: [laughing] I don’t think you want to know. I seriously question whether computers have been a force for good or have deprived us of our personalities.

NL: What has it done for you personally in your life?

Laslo: It has taught me to not be contemptuous of Solitaire. Of course, I mean any card game was bad but Solitaire was about the worst there could be. But I find that when I get frustrated, frustration begets aggressive behavior. . . . And I go into the Solitaire—then and there—well, I’m not so frustrated. And I learn to love frustration.

NL: So why are you doing it on the *computer*? Why do you find that good?

Laslo: Oh, I suppose because I resent that computer and this at least is giving it a chance to have some utility. I don’t know.

NL: The redeeming value of your computer is that you can play Solitaire on it.

Laslo: Yeah. In a nutshell, yes.

NL: So the better question in your case is what has the computer done *to* you rather than done for you.

Laslo: Oh, it’s stolen so much of my life. . . . There’s so much I used to be—but there’s no longer time to do it anymore. This computer saves so much time I haven’t got any left.

NL: So you allowed it to steal your time. Why?

Laslo: Oh, the same reason that I realized that driving around town is hurting me physically but nevertheless I keep on driving around town until now I can't drive anymore. So now I'm content to not drive around town. . . .

NL: . . . You let your computer rob you of time the same way that you drove around town at the peril of your safety. I don't see this as analogous. Could you elaborate?

Laslo: Well, uh, I don't see how I can. I'm not sure that risking my life is a bad thing. We're not going to live forever.

NL: Okay. You had to drive because you needed . . . groceries, you needed to go to the doctor, whatever. So driving was like a critical survival strategy or skill. . . . But you compare that to letting the computer eat up your time. . . . I'm saying that it seems very different since the computer wasn't a survival strategy. Or, was it?

Laslo: I don't think so. I would occasionally feel I should look this up on the computer but . . . I try it and I find I've wasted four hours and still not gotten the answer. And, I suppose it's incompetence. Someone more finally honed, more conversant with computing would have found the answer more quickly, maybe. I've got a woman who comes once a week . . . and she does the computing and it's a lot easier to say, 'Hey, can you do this for me?' than to run through it myself. Except that . . . she's only here for three hours in the week. And, two hours later, she's still—you still don't see daylight. . . . She gets something but it's not what I'm looking for.

Laslo was unable to supply any examples of the kinds of queries for which either he or Mary Jo had failed to find adequate answers. Instead, he described several instances of failed attempts to obtain information or achieve satisfactory results using the telephone. For example, he did not successfully communicate his request for a catalog at a local sporting goods store. He was unable to understand a staff member at Comcast when he called to try to get his cable connection restored. In a later conversation with that company, they claimed that they did not know what he was talking about when he called to complain that they did not keep their appointment to come to reconnect it. That experience had been repeated the week before and Laslo observed, "I'm wasting my whole life waiting for people to show up that don't show up." And certainly Laslo was as frustrated as the rest of us at being confronted with recorded phone menus. Thinking I would offer to transport Laslo to the sporting goods store while in the Park, I asked him what he wanted to buy there. His answer both surprised and didn't surprise me but it did lead me to silently rethink my offer.

Laslo: I thought possibly a Christmas gift for Leon and I'd like to have a gun again.

NL: To protect yourself?

Laslo: Perhaps. I suppose against the day when I have no recourse but to kill myself, and no way to kill myself when Kevorkian is in jail. And I don't like to feel that vulnerable. I'd like to feel that this is a decision I can make if I want to. And those who don't like it can argue with me after I've done it.

Rather than debate the merits of his argument just then, I asked pragmatic questions about the availability of guns in the state of Sunlanda and Laslo thought that the easiest way to purchase one was at gun shows but he didn't know where to find any. He claimed that local newspapers did not run gun ads in the classified section because it was considered immoral.

We talked on about this and that until Laslo asked me how I would feel about his giving my e-mail address to his son and whether I might be interested in getting in touch with him. Although I said I'd be happy to do so, we couldn't work out how I would introduce myself to Leon. After we exchanged ideas and I had supplied Laslo once again with my e-mail address, I circled around to his computer use.

NL: So back to what computers have done for you or to you. They have robbed you of time but you have allowed them to do that in your struggle to learn how to use them. Because for some reason, you thought they would be beneficial. . . . How?

Laslo: Oh, I thought they would open avenues to information that otherwise was difficult to receive—that otherwise takes too much rummaging through a library. And going to the library and forgetting what I went for when I get there.

NL: So you thought it could substitute for a library.

Laslo: Yeah, I guess I thought it would be far superior to a library. And I find that there's so much on there [i.e. the Internet] that really just purports to be helpful. There's a lot of misinformation out there. And it's not labeled information or misinformation. . . .

NL: . . . So you thought that it would be a great source of information. Was there any other reason that you struggled to use it, any other imagined or hoped for benefit?

Laslo: No.

NL: You didn't think it might be useful for exercising your mind?

Laslo: No, I guess I never thought my mind needs exercising any more than a sailor would feel that his body needs exercising when he's sailing all day long.

NL: You're satisfied with the state of your . . . cognitive abilities?

Laslo: I sense them deteriorating but I don't really know if 'use it or lose it' applies here. . . . I don't believe that using it uses it up either. I think . . . the shortage of time is what impairs my making the most of my life. And the computer doesn't seem to offer me any way of enriching my life.

NL: What about the element of keeping up, keeping current with what's going on around you. Was that a factor in your thinking?

Laslo: When I was on cruise [i.e. on his boat] for a few months at a time, I bought a television so I could get the news. And after a while, I didn't use it because I learned at the end of a couple months cruise . . . it's the same news. Nothing has changed. It's going to be the same amount of greed and deception. These things don't change.

NL: . . . I meant keeping up with cultural developments, technological developments.

Laslo: Yeah, I suppose I'm getting older. One of the things about getting older is I'm losing interest in that. Not losing it but [I have a] diminishing interest in it. I used to read *Scientific American*—a whole bunch of things—so avidly, word for word. And I now find it so laborious to read and after reading a particularly obtruse [*sic*] paragraph, suddenly it flashes on me, I misread this thing. I don't see well enough.

Our attention was then diverted to Laslo's choice of reading matter. With a combination of reading glasses and large print text, he still managed to read a few books. Besides a few investment periodicals, he subscribed to *Popular Science* and three weekend days of the local newspaper. "And I resent how much of my time they take." I told him where in the Park he could try out a magnifying reader apparatus and he said that he had been considering and collecting material on them. "What they do is they magnify so you've got to take longer to cover the same ground. It's wonderful compared to not having anything but it's [i.e. the experience of reading] not at all the same as what it used to be."

Still trying to unearth nuggets of meaning in Laslo's eight years of computer struggles, I summarized out loud what he had thus far told me. And our end point was the second source of solace that Laslo found in his computer.

NL: So you did not start using a computer or going to the Computer Club in order to stimulate your brain. You did not go there in order to keep up with cultural developments. You simply wanted a substitute for the library.

Laslo: I guess hopefully something better than a library.

NL: Right from the beginning you felt that it was an information resource.

Laslo: Yes.

NL: And you weren't also interested in keeping contact with family members by e-mail.

Laslo: No. Let's say that the idea was enticing but I found I didn't use it. When my family did try to reach me, I told them, 'Never mind, I don't use the e-mail.' I've got a cousin who's into it in a big way. He's a little younger than I am. I'll be seeing him [in a few days]. . . . He's the one that gave me that Web thing . . . [i.e. WebTV].

NL: Maybe you can sit down at your computer together and he can help you. No? . . . I was just thinking it would be a good idea. . . . Don't groan.

Laslo: No, I'm going to enjoy the visit. . . .

NL: So you would conclude that the computer is a terrible failure, that it had promise which was never realized. Never found anything useful about it.

Laslo: You're exaggerating, overemphasizing but . . . if I never use one again, I won't miss it. The major gratification I've gotten from the computer is naked women.

NL: Oh, right. . . . So the major gratification is your own private . . . little movie theater, so to speak.

Laslo: Yeah. And you know, that's gotten old. So have I.

Being more or less on the subject of graphic image, I mentioned that one big attractant to computer use in the Park was the manipulation of photos and other images. Laslo said that being in the "purist" camp of early photography, he had "no desire whatsoever" to "tinker" with the image in a photograph. We looked at the large collection on his wall.

Laslo: . . . now when I have them here, my mind's eye brings back the images. And when I . . . look at that egret, I remember [the place] and my taking this picture. It sort of brings back a mental image rather than a photographic image. And finding the same ones; they're familiar, they're more satisfying.

NL: it's a memory record, isn't it?

Laslo: . . . it's the memory helping the vision and the vision helping the memory.

During the rest of our time together, Laslo and I returned to subjects about which he had spoken at some length before. These included: his doctors wanting him to repeat the antibiotic treatment for *H-pylori* and some hair raising anecdotes about their suggestions for skirting Medicare procedures; his intolerance for alphabet speak which "interferes with communication;" the "aphorism I now live by" which was "happiness is gratitude. . . . To that I would add that frustration begets aggressive behavior;" and the irritation caused by the interminable waiting for transport to and from the grocery store. When Laslo returned to the idea of buying a "little electric scooter" for that purpose I reminded him that the rather long route between the Park and the grocery store was fraught with the perils of railroad tracks and major intersections. He brushed aside my concerns saying that it wouldn't "make much difference" whether he died at age 85 or 88. "Living isn't safe either," he concluded. That felt like the moment to return to the issue he had earlier introduced into the mix.

NL: . . . if you succeed in getting a gun, how do you know when the moment is right? . . . [D]on't you think you're always going to have that desire just to see one more day or what's coming tomorrow or—How does one know?

Laslo: Well, one can always say, 'Well, things aren't so good, but maybe they'll get better.' And sometimes they do. And one can also say, 'Gee, you know, I was so bushed last night . . . I went to sleep and I didn't dream at all and it was wonderful.' I don't know the answer. I got to accept the fact that one day this will happen anyhow, whether I like it or not. The only thing I may have some control over is whether I do it in misery and agony or whether I do it at a time of my choosing. Or maybe it's pride. No, it's not pride. It's a demand for autonomy. I want to be able to decide that. And I don't want someone insisting they can decide for me better than I can. I've been like that since I was this high [gesturing the height of a small boy].

To counterbalance these bleak thoughts, I turned our attention my "Tech Survey" and asked Laslo the questions that we had somehow neglected in previous years. The only slightly

unusual apparatus that he owned was a stand-alone copier that he or Mary Jo used about once a week for managing his affairs. Since it was nearly 9:30 p.m., I had to leave so as to not awaken my Park host. Our plan for e-mailing was again brought forth and Laslo agreed to try to communicate with me with Mary Jo's help.

**Insights:** It would seemingly have been warranted to conclude, back in 2003, that Laslo and his computer would soon part company. But, obviously, trying to anticipate the future is a foolhardy exercise. The unexpected presence in 2004 of Leon, Laslo's estranged son, changed everything. If Leon had chosen to continue to live in the Dry Springs area rather than distant towns (and if he was not subject to drug relapse thereby), Laslo's computer use could have taken a very different turn. As it was, by 11/2005 (a year after Leon's departure), Laslo's use had stagnated if not deteriorated, and he chose to remain ignorant of its function descriptors (like "operating system"). He did not mention (and thus I assume he did not experience) having to learn any new features of his eMachine's system that must have been updated since his original purchase of that brand five years earlier. On the other hand, the question of whether he might be inspired to do more Internet exploring on his new computer once his cable connection was re-established remained, in 2005, an open one.

Laslo's evaluation of his computing experience was much darker than his statements in 1999 when he thought his computer might assist his memory and bring order to his affairs. By 2005, his view was that his computer had stolen much of his life and deprived him of his personality. The implication was that in his pre-computer existence he was a contented man. Whether or not that is a credible idea, Laslo's post-computer existence clearly was not one of contentment. He did have at least some moments of success as I witnessed when the two of us found a good article on one of his physical ailments. According to his own testimony, he had, as well, some moments of pleasure through erotic websites. There is no easy way to know whether his stated resentment towards his computer in 2005 was the result of the accumulation of many instances of self-defined failures or a reflection of his outlook in general. He acknowledged that as he aged his interest in keeping up diminished. This is understandable when keeping up did not prove to be a positive or doable experience and as memory of the minor successes faded away.

Many elderly citizens such as Laslo suffer increasingly from the isolation of the non-communicative world of the hearing and vision impaired. Telephone communication was refined and expanded over the life times of individuals now in their 80s and for many years it had served



as their life lines. Just when that familiar and trusted means of gaining information was becoming critical for Laslo and any housebound elderly person of his age, the conditions of telephoning (in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century) were steadily worsening and devolving into pre-recorded menus which were often convoluted and rapidly delivered, the incomprehensible accented English of the non-native speakers serving as operators, the often unreliable transmission of cellular phones, and the increasing rate of speech in the society at large and especially among Junior citizens. Laslo was becoming dependent on his assistant, Mary Jo, for even that basic means of communicating and she was available for only a few hours in a week.

At this meeting, there were clear indications of decline in Laslo's senses. He asked me to repeat myself more often than before. He made more trial starts in his sentences and exhibited more memory lapses and fact confusion (though when either of us caught these, he was usually able to correct them). He was finding it increasingly difficult to target the keys on his computer keyboard with any success due to loss of both touch and sight. His frequent chuckles (uttered, it seemed, to soften his negativity and stark opinions) sounded more forced, sometimes strangled. He was not sleeping well and was using his trusted ally, Solitaire, as a soporific. Living was taking its toll on him. Therefore, I was pleased to learn that Laslo was participating in a Park group experience such as the fitness circle. Either I had misread his reluctance to participate in groups or it was an instance of his realization that this was a necessary intervention to stave off further physical decline. The fitness circle is an example of a kind of activity that is not heavily dependent upon acute vision or hearing; it is a macro-level, follow-along approach which was suitable for Laslo. We should consider whether such a model could be used to address other challenges within Senior living environments. In the realm of I-C technology, that might be larger, not smaller, computing devices with verbal directions and instructions/help functions.

Laslo's diagnosis of "peripheral neuropathy," a manifestation of poor circulation to the extremities, is one of the outcomes he worked hard to prevent through his careful attention to food choices and the maintenance of a healthy weight. (And it may be that his preventive approach to self-care had kept it at bay in the preceding years.) Aging, for some individuals, entails such hard work to stay alive that they have little energy left over for life. Small wonder, then, that they increasingly entertain thoughts of dying. Predicting one's demise in X number of years (two for Laslo) can provide psychological relief from the specter of this draining life-work

continuing indefinitely. Another relief valve could be having (or perhaps just talking about) the means (a gun, for Laslo) to opt out of living even if its use is only dimly conceptualized.

It was lamentable that Laslo spent all of his energy monitoring, sheltering and growing his money in view of his statement to me that it wasn't his money; it was (that is, would become) his son's. Yet all the while he was convinced that his son lacked the ability to use it wisely by which Laslo would have meant the continued investment of the money over Leon's lifetime. I offered no opinion on the matter but I wondered whether Laslo could have interested his son in the prospect of wise money use if he had embraced Leon's interest in the church. If, for example, the prospect of supporting church-sponsored drug rehabilitation facilities were a part of the equation they might have found a way towards rapprochement. Lessening the estrangement between them would have been a powerful elixir for Laslo and possibly Leon, as well.

Laslo was grieving the loss of his sweetheart (the third of at least three major relationships that I knew about) and, I believe, the loss of a missing (which is what Leon was, in effect) child. A grief counselor (Rando 1991) states that any loss and its associated sense of deprivation entails grief and that grief-worthy losses are many—changing a household, losing a job, a decline in status, or losing physical abilities as we age. While death is a *physical* loss, other kinds of losses are *symbolic* ones and may be no less keenly felt. Thus Laslo was also experiencing significant numbers of symbolic losses—of health and stamina, of sensory organs and cognitive functioning, and a kind of loss that is far less heralded than any of those—the loss of *time*. Time loss is a malady that afflicts everyone who ages and one for which there is no assistive device, cure, or palliative remedy.

Laslo and I met for an **eighth time in October, 2008**. During my three-year absence from the Park, Laslo and I had communicated only three to four times, by telephone or e-mail. However, I sent greetings to him via other Park residents with whom I had more regular contact and they kept me informed of their occasional “Laslo sightings.” So, for example, Barbara Howard sent me this message about an encounter with him in the Fall of 2007,

I ran into Laslo at our health screening today. He was so pleased to hear greetings from you! On a little note paper with his address he scratched ‘Hello, Norma, I miss you.’

When I telephoned Laslo in late October he seemed happy to hear my voice and when I asked to meet with him he told me to pick a time and he would be ready. At 9:15 a.m. on a

Monday, I arrived at his cottage. A ball of white bed sheets, apparently awaiting a pick-up, had been plopped on top of the little concrete feline sculpture that always sat beside his front door. Clothed in neat shirt and slacks, he welcomed me in with a large smile and expansive greeting. His appearance was basically unchanged—medium height and build, a broad face with a shock of white hair above. He appeared to have gained a few pounds and lost a few more teeth in the previous three years. Laslo's response to my "how are you?" was cryptic, "Oh, getting younger." As we moved to our usual places—I on his couch under the wall of his photographs and he in the adjacent armchair, I noted that his furniture arrangement was the same as in 2005, including the placement of his computer/desk adjacent to the seating area in his living room. But there were two new items in his living room; the first was the scooter about which he had spoken three years earlier. He called it a "power chair" and said that he was using it or a cane due to a lack of sensation in his feet. The second was a 'reader' for magnifying print materials; it resembled an early computer monitor that had been elevated on a stand.

My polite inquiry about the major health issue, *H Pylori*, that Laslo had struggled with in the past plunged us into his sad state of affairs within the Park. Regarding the *H Pylori*, he assured me that it was not a problem as long as he cooked for himself. But even that was becoming an insurmountable challenge as his update revealed.

Laslo: If I eat my own cooking, then it's no problem. But I don't like to cook. [chuckles] I came to Flamingo Park so I wouldn't have to prepare my own food. [chuckles (chk)]

N: How do you get out to get your groceries?

Laslo: Once a month or so I take the [Park] bus to [the nearby grocery store] and buy one or two hundred dollars of groceries. I bought a freezer.

NL: Can you get on the bus with that power chair?

Laslo: No, but I use a cane, I get on the bus—I take a [Park] cart to the bus and I take the bus to [the grocery store] and . . . they have a cart there that I can use. The crazy thing is [that the store] has four of—no eight of them lined up for everybody to use and there's no problem. Here, in Flamingo Park if I take that thing out the door I get reprimanded because I don't have insurance.

NL: Who reprimands you?

Laslo: One of the security guards. . . . They asked me, do I have insurance. And I was honest. . . . I think the only reason is because one of the directors sells insurance. . . . [chk]

NL: Well, you probably have an insurance policy—a homeowner's policy. . . .

Laslo: I don't. I've learned that insurance is just a way of wasting more time and more grief and more frustration. If I had a major loss how could I . . . prove what these things are worth?

NL: Well what they tell you is to photograph all of your valuables, keep them in a separate place and then they replace them.

Laslo: Oh. That stuff there? [pointing in the direction of his computer] . . . Oh no. . . . I'm pointing to the books and the compact discs, the music. . . . And my tools. These are the only things really that I prize and if I lose them I'm not going to replace them because I can't see enough to use the tools anyway. [chk]

NL: . . . Okay so what about your electronics?

Laslo: I don't see well enough to get much out of the computer and these things have controls that are rather complex and they are printed with various legends. This does that, that does that. But it is written on black on black. . . . Well maybe I'm exaggerating. . . . At least grey on grey. Dark grey on—[chk]. But I'll admit that now it's gotten so bad I can't even use the black on white on my microwave. I can't read it.

The "scads" of magnifying glasses that Laslo owned helped only a little because with his eye condition "things are distorted and it's sort of like the rippled side of the shower glass." If Laslo were able to do any reading, it would be on the subject of finance. He was even more concerned than in past years about his investments because like the rest of the citizenry he had lost about half of his savings in the national economic downturn. As before, Laslo's financial planning had a single focus. "Actually my only concern is my son. . . . I don't think it's going to matter. He's going to blow it all quickly as he can." According to Laslo's detailed update, his son Leon had continued to remain drug free and to maintain his minimum wage job in a restaurant in another town. Laslo told me ruefully that he hadn't heard from Leon for about six months though he continued to support him in various ways such as giving him his secretary's old car. "Well anyway I wish I could help him somehow but I don't see how I can. . . . I suppose I give him about \$10,000 a year. And still he doesn't have money. I think if he got \$50,000 a year he'd still not have any money."

Since it was an unusually exciting election year, I asked Laslo if we might talk about politics, and he said "Be my guest." He then informed me that he was not able to follow the campaigns because he couldn't read and it was "too frustrating. . . ." When I asked if he was planning to vote he said he was not.

NL: Why not, if I may ask?

Laslo: Because I can't see and I can't read and I can't be informed. . . . I would just be tossing a coin really.

NL: So you don't have a party affiliation that would carry you through in that you're more of an independent thinker?

Laslo: Well not only that but if I were relying on a party affiliation we know how colored that would be. . . . Well I would be voting for Democrats and they will be telling me how wonderful the Democrats are. Whether they are or aren't. Right now I get stuff in the mail and apparently they're making a big thing

about badmouthing their opponent to the point where you don't even know who it is you're supposed to vote for. All you know is who you're supposed to vote against. . . .

NL: Do you know [the candidates'] personal histories?

Laslo: Well Obama is a Hawaiian or what have you and what he will do politically I haven't the foggiest notion and I don't know if he does.

NL: Yeah. So you know his racial background?

Laslo: Yeah. I would feel that I could vote for him just because at least my vote means something. . . . It would mean that I approve of our country being tolerant. And actually I think it's very—. I'm delighted he seems to be doing well in the polls and I imagine he will be our next president and he may not have as much experience but that means he doesn't know how to steal as much. Bush leaves me completely disgusted with politics.

Laslo went on to criticize various governmental and economic policies such as the billions of dollars for bailouts and the printing of money “at full speed.” He expressed his trenchant opinions on the other political candidates, as well, and it seemed that he knew a substantial amount about the current events notwithstanding his claim of being ill informed. He agreed with my supposition that his main source of news was his television. Laslo believed that whoever became the next president would “have to clean up a mess that perhaps is not able to be cleaned up.” He then compared election campaign promises to Flamingo Park and recounted a long history of unpleasant interactions with the Park management involving what he perceived to be deception, broken promises and the necessity of currying the favors of administrators. He concluded that he was not getting his money's worth from the Park in no small measure because he couldn't eat the food prepared in their kitchen. Dietary problems comprised a long-standing concern for Laslo. He said that although he liked fresh fruit and vegetables, they posed a shopping challenge since he was limited in mobility and couldn't get to the store often enough to keep them in stock. I offered to buy Laslo some fresh produce while in town and he listed his favorites, declining a few of my suggestions such as vegetables, kiwis and apples:

Laslo: I don't have the teeth to eat apples anymore.

NL: Even in small pieces?

Laslo: Not even in small pieces. And besides I don't have the temperament to eat small pieces.

In order to dislodge us from Laslo's alimentary issues, I enquired as to whether he continued to employ Mary Jo to conduct his business such as letter writing. In 2005, he was already relying heavily on her eyesight and computer skills. He told me that she was coming three times a week and that as a “computer tutor” she had other clients, as well. Noting that

Laslo's computer screen was opened to Solitaire, I asked if he could still see well enough to play it. "Barely. It gets more difficult than it used to be." What else did Laslo do on his computer besides Solitaire?

Laslo: I guess mostly I don't. I've deteriorated. I've gotten to the point where I ask Mary Jo to do it for me.

NL: To play the Solitaire for you?

Laslo: No, no—. No, to occasionally look up something that I want to buy or such but by and large it's almost exclusively monitoring my investments.

NL: So what have you bought online through your computer, lately?

Laslo: I'm trying to think. There were some things. Books. This was when I could still read and I don't know if I've bought anything online after that. . . . I do however use it to look up stuff and then ask Mary Jo to buy it for me. I guess I'm still not confident about ordering on the computer. . . . I'm still not used to doing it.

NL: . . . So do you do searches?

Laslo: Very superficially. It's hard when you can't read to search for what you don't know what it is. . . . I ask Mary Jo to look up things. [chk]

NL: . . . Are there any other games besides Solitaire that you can see or play?

Laslo: Solitaire is like knitting. . . . When I've got to sit here waiting for a bus or something then I play that Solitaire. When I'm waiting for Norma Linton to come by I run the Solitaire while I'm waiting.

Survival needs were taking up most of Laslo's waking hours. His time was divided between the rigors of shopping in the absence of easy transport ("And the only reason it's only *half* a day is because they don't go past half a day. The bus stops running at noon.") and caring for his financial well-being. He estimated that he spent fifty percent of his time monitoring his investments online (and by telephone), trading through an investment company and/or preparing his taxes for his accountant. Even when I asked him how he spent the other fifty percent of his time, Laslo's financial worries insinuated themselves into his thinking. Because his son, Leon, apparently lived a hand to mouth existence, Laslo's anxiety was becoming focused on Leon's life. As aggravating as this apparently was for him, it seemed to be the motivating force for Laslo's (waning) interest in remaining alive. And, it was his financial concerns on behalf of Leon that continued to inspire Laslo's use of his computer, albeit indirectly, with Mary Jo's help. He required her help because, "My fingers hit the wrong key. I can't read the keys and I was never really good with the computer but now I'm useless practically."

NL: Yeah. But when your secretary is here do you sit by her side? She reads to you what it says and, I don't know, whatever investment page you go to and then she—

Laslo: I ask her to see what maybe Warren Buffet is doing, Berkshire Hathaway. So she will look it up and I may say, 'Hey, good, let's print that up.' and then I ask her what energy is doing. I've got about \$XXX in [a company] and she looks it up and she reads me numbers. I try to get her to print a graph on almost everything. The graph I can see quickly. I don't have to put it in words. It's right there and I don't have to see it in detail, it's a line. So I do rather well with that and I found that you've got to know what you want but now I have one source for a graph of price day by day for ten years . . . That's when I'm interested in shape. When I want detail I say 'Give me thirty days.' But when I want to get an overall picture I like ten years. But I do that then for price but I also do total return and total return includes distributions and dividends so for some things it's the only way to go at it.

In his foregoing comments about graphs and in his subsequent description of trying to understand TV programs, Laslo's observations about the form and shape that information can take were noteworthy. He was seeking a less detailed configuration of stimuli—both visually and aurally since the various strategies he had tried did not substantially improve his sensory input. He had given up almost entirely on trying to read newspapers or magazines and was narrowing his choice of televised programming to what I called a "white hats vs. black hats" mode in which he could anticipate predictability.

Laslo: It's a chore to get the gist of what might be in the TV show, what might be in the program, and I attempt that because if I'm wrong it isn't all that much lost anyway. [chk] But it gets very frustrating.

NL: . . . what do you like to watch on television?

Laslo: Well you know this has changed so much. I guess now the nature things are the only things I really watch because I got a fair idea of what he's [i.e. the narrator] gonna' say. I know what he's talking about. It's not gonna' change. They're not gonna' throw a new character or a new plot into it. It reminds me of my father. My father had a hearing problem also and my mother used to feel so unhappy how he would play the television so loud and he used to watch only the 'shoot 'em up' westerns. Well, only afterwards did I realize what it was. Of course when you're watching a horse going along you know it's a horse going along. [chk] And when you see them shooting you know what's going on. You can follow the plot.

NL: No surprises . . . black hats, white hats.

Laslo: Yeah. It seemed to work for him. . . . And I do watch the history channel. That's about it. *Nightly Business Report*. I get that every night. Oh, that's [i.e. his computer] my alarm clock. It turns on at 7:00 in the morning. . . . It wakes me up.

NL: Alright. So your television is in your bedroom?

Laslo: Oh yes . . . I think televisions only belong in bedrooms.

The telephone rang at 10:15, interrupting our conversation. Laslo explained that Park Security called residents each morning to make sure they were "still breathing." The staff person acknowledged that they were late in calling but wanted to check to be sure that Laslo was okay. He had failed to push the call button in an electrical network the Park had throughout its housing units. When residents failed to respond, a security staff person was sent to investigate. Laslo had been battling this procedure for years, trying to persuade security personnel to neither call nor

check on him in person. He did not like people entering his cottage uninvited or in his absence. For one thing he resented the intrusion on his privacy and for another he was a late sleeper and their calls disrupted his sleep. Also sums of money and an expensive hearing aid had disappeared after one of the housekeepers had shown interest in the latter. A week before my visit Laslo had rigged up a wooden pole and rope to place diagonally across the inside of his door to prevent entry from the outside. In any case, Laslo's sleep patterns were changing and he stated, when I again asked him to tell me how he passed the time, that he was spending more time during the day in bed, sleeping.

NL: You just get tired and lie down?

Laslo: That and at night I don't get to sleep so I stay up too late and then I sleep late and then they [i.e. security staff] wake me up.

NL: Right. So late at night you're mainly watching television?

Laslo: No. Well, 'til about 3:00 o'clock. . . . I'm sorry I didn't mean that. I meant until about 11:00 o'clock. Then if I can't sleep, apparently because I slept during the day, why then I'll get up and put some Solitaire on.

NL: Oh. [chuckles] Okay. So that Solitaire has an important function then. . . . Do you have it enlarged so that you can see the numbers on the cards?

Laslo: I can't see them clearly but I do well enough. I've learned to count the pips. . . .

When I suggested that another kind of soporific might be the late night talk shows hosted by comedians, Laslo dismissed this possibility due to their rapid rate of speaking. "The older I get, the faster they talk." Laslo reiterated his theory that the problem might be a systemic one such as that which occurred several decades earlier when the telephone company removed parts of words to squeeze more into their signals. He was willing to believe that the same process could be taking place in radio and television transmissions. Laslo said he couldn't even understand weather reports due to fast speech and wondered why the media were "wasting their money advertising something where you don't even know what they're talking about much less what they're saying."

Regarding the subject of sleep and Laslo's overall health, I asked if he thought that exercise would improve things. Although he was aware of the spiraling cycle he was in as a result of his drastically reduced activity level, he averred that he was "completely disinclined" to do anything about it. He responded to all my suggestions with his usual acerbic humor.

NL: You're sleeping during the day because you're bored, do you think?



Laslo: Perhaps. I'm not sure. I've tried to figure it out and it didn't come. I didn't feel it required all that much analyzing.

NL: It's just easier to sleep than to think about it. But what about physical exercise?

Laslo: You mean I'll have to live longer? . . . Well I don't want to seem to be negative but I used to enjoy walking immensely. I used to walk several miles a day every day. Now I can't walk across the street and back without being winded. . . . I know I've been told all my life you've gotta' exercise. My father used to always say that, 'You've gotta' exercise. Work never hurt anybody.' Until he retired and then he says work is what kills people. [chk]

Finally, Laslo stopped my continued urging for him to keep striving for better health with a simple request, "let me go in peace." Our discussion then took a turn into the realm of the absurd when he began telling me of his fear that he would be ejected from the Park once he became further incapacitated. His fear was fueled when he was rebuffed in his efforts to explore moving to Assisted Living. I was unsuccessful in my attempt to dissuade him from his truly unwarranted belief that he could be asked to leave the Park for health failures.

Laslo: I called—I forgot her title or function—[Director of A.L.]. Well anyway I asked her for more information about Assisted Living . . . Why am I asking is what she said and I says well I'm asking because if I ever have to do something about that I'd like to be prepared ahead of time. I don't want to wait until it's too late and she said she will consider it. And she called me . . . and she said she has considered it very carefully and she feels it would not be in my best interest to go into that. . . . I think I was being told that they wouldn't make room for me anyway and they didn't have enough room as it is and that maybe there's a one-year waiting list. I don't know . . .

NL: By which she means that you're fully functional or you're functional enough here?

Laslo: I think it only means that she doesn't wanna' bother with me in Assisted Living.

NL: They have to find a place for you when you can't function here. That's why you came here.

Laslo: No they don't. . . . [W]hen they don't find you a place you get told, 'Well, we're sorry but we can't keep you here because we can't take care of you.' . . . This is exactly what happens when people get to be a problem. It's what happens when people get to be a nuisance. This is Flamingo Park.

Laslo recalled the condo apartment he had lived in before he moved to Flamingo Park and spoke of the many friends and helpful neighbors he had had who shared his interests. He had thought of moving out of the Park to try to recapture his former life, and cited once again the "complete dearth of creativity" in the Park. I told Laslo about the Park residents I had met who were quite talented in many things like digital photography and leaded glass work. He conceded, "Maybe it's just me getting older. I don't know."

What sources of enjoyment did Laslo derive from life, I asked him, thinking that I might brighten his mood. That conversational pathway, however, led to the same dead end—Laslo's demise. But on this visit, at least, he was not talking about shooting himself. Laslo's statement,

reported below, that he had done his share of problem solving—meaning he did not feel the need to do any more—was another way for him to express his feeling that he was done with living. Thus, he equated the two processes. Then, suddenly, Laslo’s attention turned to the elusive möbius band, a subject and object he had introduced and made for me on several previous occasions. He linked it to Flamingo Park life but I wondered if it was his talk of dying that reminded him of that endless strip of paper that he created over and over and if that could be a clue to its meaning for him.

NL: So, do you still get some enjoyment from life?

Laslo: I suppose I do.

NL: And what is that?

Laslo: Talking with you.

NL: Thank you. What else?

Laslo: Seeing my son if he gets here again.

NL: Excellent. And I have to say to you, Laslo, that’s a great thing for you to have somebody to worry about. I wish I did. So it’s no small thing. So what else have you got as sources of enjoyment?

Laslo: Oh what else have I got? [chk] A computer that I can’t see.

NL: I think you get enjoyment out of the investment challenge. You’re moving your hands in a [so-so] gesture.

Laslo: Yeah. I mean it’s—maybe it’s got some pluses but it’s got more minuses.

NL: I see. Yeah. Well it kind of gives you a problem solving challenge, which I think we all need. . . .

Laslo: I guess I feel I’ve done my problem solving and I suppose I’m reconciled to this because I’m no longer able to solve problems.

NL: Well you’re trading, you’re managing your investments. That’s a major problem solving, isn’t it?

Laslo: Yuh. . . .

NL: So other sources of enjoyment in life? Memories, are they a source of enjoyment at all?

Laslo: I guess, perhaps—I don’t know. I’ve got some bad ones, too. [chk]

NL: . . . But your brain is still in good shape. I mean, you don’t need to compare it to what it was—just as it is today. It still functions quite highly, gets the job done, gets you around, satisfies your needs. . . . I mean this is a source of rejoicing . . . Don’t you think?

Laslo: Well I don’t know. If I were to fall asleep and never wake up it wouldn’t bother me . . . .

NL: But if somebody gave you the wherewithal to do that today would you do that?

Laslo: I don't know, maybe next week. [chk]

NL: See? Because there's still things to do.

Laslo: Yep. Okay when you were last here did we talk about möbius bands?

NL: Yeah you gave me one. Why has that come up again?

Laslo: I wondered if I ought to give you one. [chk]

NL: What is the meaning of giving me one? Why do you—What's the impulse there? What's the motivation for that? . . . Is there some deep philosophical meaning to the möbius strip or band?

Laslo: I don't think so. I think when I mentioned it to you before I think I discussed it and spoke of it as being appropriate for Flamingo Park. Because there's only one side to it. That's the only philosophical connection I can find. [chk]

Rather than attempting to decipher the mystery of the möbius just then, I asked Laslo if he was getting hungry and suggested that we have lunch. He offered me some of his large supply of cheese but I had brought a snack so he gathered a few things for himself from the refrigerator. We sat down at a little table just outside the kitchen and continued our conversation as we ate. We talked about the cost of hiring tutors or other helpers for home computing; Cody Peabody was then charging \$80 an hour. Laslo had increased his hourly payment to Mary Jo from seven to ten dollars an hour although she charged other people \$40. Her big payment—ownership of a mutual fund and a number of Krugerrand [i.e., gold coins]—would occur upon Laslo's death, through a P.O.D. order. Laslo had invested a great deal of trust in Mary Jo's judgment, had laid a fair amount of responsibility upon her and was becoming concerned about his heavy dependency on her.

Laslo: And I didn't realize this until rather recently but if she suddenly were to decide this isn't good enough for her and she's going to leave me or take a better offer or maybe be unable to work or retire on my wealth [chk] I might just feel, 'Well, I'll change that.' I don't know. . . . I mean this has been going on for a few years and only recently did I realize that, gee, if she should leave me—. She went on vacation last year, took a month off . . . and I was strapped. I mean I've gotten to depend on her. . . . Here for a whole month when people call me I say, 'Sorry I can't do anything. My secretary won't be back until next month.' So that's when I started thinking. So if she should leave me I don't know what I would do, as I said.

NL: That's the problem with dependency. You're vulnerable.

Laslo: . . . I've left all the contents of this apartment in my will to Mary Jo. . . . Leon wouldn't know what to do with it. He would find some reason for not coming down to see to get it away; he would feel he doesn't need this garbage.

At 2 o'clock, I turned off the tape recorder, noting that in an hour Mary Jo would arrive. I asked Laslo if he would like me to leave so that he could rest up for his meeting with her but he

said no, that mine was the most welcome visit [he had had] in a year. While waiting for Mary Jo's arrival Laslo and I revisited our familiar territory of topics, such as, his long struggles with audiologists to find good hearing aids, Flamingo Park as institution (even referencing Erving Goffman) and whether or not he was still able to read. Motivated by the possibility of finding Laslo some interesting reading matter for him on books on tape, I asked him what his favorite subject matter then was. He said that he no longer read for pleasure; "Mostly, the information I need is current, up-to-date information." In addition, he thought he wouldn't be able to hear the tape recordings. I persisted, suggesting large-print books as an alternative. After I exhausted my list of traditional genres, Laslo said, "I find I can reminisce by reading some porn." When I asked him if there was such a thing as large print porn he laughed loudly and heartily as he said he thought not. He said that he liked erotic stories, not "just plain garbage." He assured me that it was something that neither he nor Mary Jo would want to discuss.

For a change of pace, I asked Laslo if there were anything he would like to ask me and he inquired as to my research work and livelihood. When in the course of that, I mentioned my working hypothesis about people needing to have meaningful problems to solve, he offered me an instance of that from his days as a young scientist.

I remember during the war there was an ordinance plant in Illinois . . . and they hired a whole bunch of chemists for a laboratory that had not yet been built. But they hired them so that they'd have them when the laboratory was built and I was one of these chemists. And for six months there was no chemistry, no laboratory, no nothing and we were going crazy trying to pass time, telling dirty stories, whatever. It got nowhere and then one of our supervisors gave us problems. Well it was better than nothing but it wasn't meaningful either.

Although Laslo had told me on several occasions of how his research career was interrupted, he shared many more details this time, including the interesting fact that his research was a part of the Manhattan Project. In order to keep that military endeavor top secret, the research on it was scattered all across the country and done by scientists who did not know the goal of their research. After working for a year without knowing it was on *the* project, Laslo lost his job.

Laslo: I got discharged from that job and because my—because I was born in a Balkan country—that was just too big of a risk. . . . I think the reason is because my assistant who was older than I was very aggressive, jealous, envious. He felt that he should have my job. He didn't even know what he was doing.

NL: Did he turn you in?

Laslo: I think he invented things about me and I got told I am discharged—. 'Here's two weeks pay, we can't tell you why, period.' Later on I learned that my friends had been investigated by the FBI. . . . My friends had been told that I was an illegal alien at nine months old.

Thereafter, Laslo again found himself in troubled waters as an independent research scientist dealing with governmental contracts, shifts in war policies and so on. Laslo's tone while narrating this terrible event of his life was one of resignation.

Seeing that it was time for Mary Jo to arrive, I started to bring our conversation marathon to a close by telling Laslo that I would return before I left the Park with some fresh fruit for him. "Just bring yourself," he replied and then added, "I will have ten pounds of cheese for you." Since cheese was a major staple of Laslo's diet, I appreciated its worth to him but politely declined, explaining the impracticality of my carrying around cheese in the scorching Sunlanda heat of the day. I then thought of another gift I could give to Laslo. If, I asked him, I could also bring with me some evidence that he was in no danger of being kicked out of the Park, would that bring him some peace of mind? His reply of "I wouldn't believe it . . . I've been living with it so long now" led me once again to ask whether he was a cynic. No, he was a "realist," he asserted. Was he a pessimist, I wondered? Laslo pointed to the two photos of a bird – one in white, one in intense colors—on his wall.

Laslo: That, that egret. . . . If I were pessimistic I never would have felt that I should try to do that [i.e. invent a process in color radar].

NL: Maybe you weren't pessimistic then. Maybe life has made you pessimistic. What do you think?

Laslo: If I were pessimistic I wouldn't keep giving my son money.

Laslo's assessment was persuasive on both points. It was *after* he lost his job with the Manhattan Project that he had made his inventions in color radar. And his continuing support of his son was truly an act of hope.

Just before 3 o'clock, Mary Jo arrived and saved Laslo 'by the bell' from another exercise/fitness pep talk into which I was launching. Indeed, as I opened the door and admitted Mary Jo, Laslo was telling me that his idea of fitness was "whiskeyba," which, he explained, meant 'water of life' in Gaelic. I shared his remark with Mary Jo after introducing myself and then commented on this whiskey fitness program. Her response (and subsequent ones) evidenced a level of concern with his well-being that was maternal in tone.

NL: *Whiskeyba*? Okay, whatever works.

Mary Jo: Yeah, but is it working?

NL: Well he's still sitting there. I have to say, I'm pleased at that. [to Laslo:] At least I can bring you fruit. I can't make you eat it but I can bring you the fruit.

Mary Jo moved directly over to Laslo's computer and we soon heard a voice coming from it. She had just installed a new application—a talking clock. She enlarged the clock square until Laslo could see it. He was delighted and, as was his wont, found the humor.

Laslo: I can read this clock. This clock I can read.

NL: The one in your bedroom?

Laslo: The one in the bedroom I can't. [the computer clock talks again]

Mary Jo: I got it louder. . . .

Laslo: I'll buy another computer and put it in the bedroom.

It was time to leave Laslo alone with Mary Jo so I picked up my things and moved to the door. I couldn't resist the urge to make one last effort to understand Laslo's stance on voting and asked if anything could persuade him to change his mind on voting or not voting.

Laslo: I guess I'm not voting on principle.

NL: And the principle is?

Laslo: Not voting. [chk]

NL: . . . Did you vote in the last election four years ago?

Laslo: I don't think so.

NL: Eight years ago?

Laslo: Oh, I'm sure I did. Eight years ago? I'm sure I did . . . .know I voted against Bush. [laughs] That was the only reason for voting.

NL: Okay, So, you don't feel such an urgent need because Bush is definitely gone.

Laslo: That's well put, yeah. . . . I really don't feel competent to vote.

NL: That's very principled because hardly any of us are truly competent in the sense of having all the information and all the facts. It's so hard to get at that.

Laslo: I really think that what little information I have is what has been filtered as being suitable for me to have, and I hate to feel that I'm just a pawn for somebody else.

NL: And yet you get a fair amount of news through the television.

Laslo: A fair amount, yeah, and it's filtered news too.

NL: . . . But print material is also filtered and biased.

Laslo: Yes but—well what shall I say? I can choose the editors.

On this occasion I thought that our ritual promise of keeping in touch with e-mail or otherwise might have potential for realization with Mary Jo added into the equation. She verified that Laslo neither sent nor received e-mail but said that she would write it if he cared to dictate it. I reminded him that it was a two-way street and that with no response I wouldn't be inspired to write. "We'll have to work on that" was as far as Laslo was willing to promise. A few days later, I stopped by with several bags of fruit and helped Laslo refrigerate it. He was reluctant to see me go and I promised to return. I hoped that his regular contact with Mary Jo and his concern for Leon would sustain his interest in living until I could.

**Epilogue:** True to her word, Mary Jo sent me an e-mail that afternoon so that I would have Laslo's address. Between November of 2008 and April of 2009 Laslo dictated (for Mary Jo to send) six e-mails in response to my e-mails, letter and gifts of fruit, token of thanks for our meeting and muffins I baked from a box of assorted grains and flours he had sent to me. In an effort to introduce Laslo to VIP, a Park group designed for the vision impaired, I contacted via e-mail two other Park men to coordinate his attendance (after explaining the idea to him). He wrote to thank me for my concern and to say that he was looking forward to being in touch with Samuel Dunlop, our mutual acquaintance. After the meeting he reported, "I went to the Vision Program but could not understand a word. Sam Dunlop was there but I was reticent about talking to him." In his last e-mail in April, 2009, Laslo said, "Thanks for the delicious muffins which Mary Jo and I shared. Your visit was delightful and I will look forward to a renewal." As always, he ended with "Stay happy." To my chatty e-mail in June and a second enquiry in September ('09), I received no replies.

**Insights:** Laslo was hanging on—albeit with strong resentment and frustration—to his computer's functions, be they through his secretary's eyes and hands or through his clouded senses. He was, after all, directing her actions, envisioning the questions and his needs. As long as he had Leon's future to worry about and as long as he had Mary Jo's help, it is likely that Laslo would refrain from jettisoning his machine. However little Leon appreciated the fact, it was his existence that kept Laslo out of the sporting goods store. On the other hand, I believed Laslo's statement that he was ready to not awaken on any given day.

Laslo was not the only Park resident to use the word "frustration" in conjunction with computing efforts; even Barbara Howard, a most devoted computer user, spoke of that feeling often. No one else, however, had such a preoccupation with the concept or, indeed, a theory

about it. Laslo linked frustration to resentment, anger, aggression and even global psychopathology. He, in other words, felt it intensely. As I listened to him talk about the high powered work he had done on one of the most all encompassing societal projects ever undertaken, I found a context in which to place Laslo's frustration about not being able to master computing. At our first session with his computer in 1999, he had expressed raw anger over the difficulties he was having understanding its design and functions. He had assumed that his science background would provide the platform from which to comprehend contemporary I-C technologies, especially given the fact that many other people were using them effectively. His frustration turned to rage when his assumptions were not born out, when he was stymied in his efforts. One might wonder whether his intense feelings surrounding those initial computing blockages were echoes of the feelings he must have had when his career was destroyed.

Prior to 2008, Laslo had stated that his secretary, Mary Jo assisted him one day a week for three hours. On this last visit, however, he stated that she was coming three times a week for several hours. I can't be sure that he wasn't mis-speaking, but there is evidence that she was there on more than one day a week because the e-mails she sent to me on Laslo's behalf were written on three different weekdays. I noted also that by 2008, he had changed her title from 'assistant' to 'secretary' though she labeled herself a 'computer tutor.' It isn't clear if that was meaningful to either of them but Mary Jo performed many duties for Laslo ranging from computer amanuensis to personal shopper. She was his computing proxy for everything except his two favorite computer pastimes, Solitaire and erotica. There was an irony in the fact that while Laslo railed against filtered news and disdained it, nearly all of his communicative activities had become filtered through Mary Jo, including personal e-mail. Why had I received no reply to my June, 2009, e-mail to Laslo (nor to one sent in the Fall of 2009)? My supposition is that the time period of nearly three months between my early April and late June messages was too large a gap for him to keep checking for mail from me. Laslo had warned me that he did not do e-mail. At last, my unasked question of what inspired Mary Jo's eight years of loyalty was answered. Laslo's P.O.D. arrangement was his approach to employee 'tenure.' And since part of this promised bonus was a mutual fund, Laslo was presumably able to enlist Mary Jo's interest in his business of investing by giving her a stake in it.

Games were installed on computers for the amusement of their owners. Computer instructors (like Cody Peabody) decided that some of them, such as Solitaire, could be used as



instructional devices to allow novice users to practice eye-hand coordination. I encountered many individuals of varying ages who, in the earlier days of PCs (before there were so many other online visual amusements), stated that they were addicted to Solitaire. Laslo, however, experienced a kind of imprinting process, fixating on playing Solitaire to the exclusion of most other computing applications. It apparently was a form of meditation, a therapy that soothed him when he felt blocked or with no means of control. This too, is ironic given his oft-stated contempt for the actual card game which was in his view fit only for children or idiots. Solitaire had another therapeutic benefit for Laslo; it gave him a sense of doing something, thereby satisfying his need to be somehow productive in his waning years. Sitting idly was not in his make-up.

Laslo had the perception (which I shared) that speech in many domains of the surrounding culture was speeding up—among younger speakers, in mass media broadcasts, in telephone menus and by live operators. The cause might be, as he suggested, an intentional plan to conserve aural space or to inject more commercial messages into listeners, or it might be an unintentional result of the hyper drive pace of a ‘high tech’ culture. Since the rate of human speech cannot increase indefinitely, it must follow that the number of uttered words have to be reduced in the interest of maintaining fast-paced visual action. This “rise of the image and the fall of the word” was described by Stephens (1998) who chronicled the ways in which TV productions—especially advertisements—communicate without words. One solution that Laslo (and his father before him) employed to deal with hearing loss was attending to the images of televised stories rather than the spoken words. This worked with programs like “westerns” where the dialog was sparse, characters few, and the plot predictable. Laslo found that nature specials in which the number of (human) characters was limited were the easiest to comprehend. The reduction in spoken words in favor of imagery has a parallel in printed text. Laslo’s example of how he could understand information presented as a graph rather than words (which he couldn’t read) is instructive. It is a work-around that should be of interest for computer interface designers. Graphs are a handy means of summarizing information, but for those with drastically reduced vision, they might also serve as a critical strategy for acquiring that information.

Notwithstanding Laslo’s statements that he was too ill informed to vote, he evidenced a good awareness of current events—as much or more than the average citizens of my acquaintance. Whether he was unaware of how much information he had been gathering from

the media (and/or through discussions with his secretary), or whether he was comparing the amount with former times when he could hear and see better, Laslo was not really devoid of facts. To say that his disinclination to vote was more likely a part of his disinclination to do anything—as opposed to a principled position—would be harsh. An alternate view is that his stance was a means to deflect attention from his advancement down the road to reclusiveness. All things considered, Laslo’s life was regressing to survival mode in which much of his time was devoted to obtaining food and insuring that he had enough income on which to live—a preoccupation made more urgent given his belief that he might have to find alternate living arrangements in the future.

It is appalling that Laslo’s effort to establish a communal existence in the Assisted Living complex was rejected. If he were accepted into that facility and lifeway, it is possible that he could grow into a more socially engaged person. He might lay his more radical opinions aside in the interest of bonding with a few of the men such as Samuel Dunlop who, at the very least, had a voice loud enough for even Laslo to hear. One advantage of residing in Assisted Living is that there are activities aimed at keeping people fit and socially engaged. Such programs are mere steps away from residents’ rooms. No one is forced to take part in them but they are made aware of their existence and receive moral support for participating. Could Laslo’s dietary needs have been a negative factor in the decision? A lower-fat menu would be a healthy alternative for many of the A.L. residents. But residents’ rents and many fees for their housing and services were apparently not sufficient to cover the cost of customizing diets. A more compelling reason to refuse Laslo admittance to the A.L., could have been his reputation as a dissenter or even worse, a rabble rouser, due to his previous association with what some Park residents felt was an anti-establishment cohort. Park contracts might even contain a “non-nuisance” clause, which stipulates that disruptive individuals could be asked to leave. Perhaps it was that (rather than calamitous health conditions) which prompted Laslo to think that his tenure in Flamingo Park was not guaranteed. Whatever the circumstances, Laslo clearly had been—and felt—rejected.

**General Discussion:** Laslo declared he had been badly bruised by life and he indeed had had his share of unpleasant cultural experiences at the hands of state agents. As a child, Laslo recalled being noticed as different by virtue of his unusual name and, I suspect, by virtue of a slight accent to his English. Whether as a child of immigrants, or by virtue of his singular personality, which included the arrogance of brilliance, Laslo may never have fully fit into his

surroundings. Swimming against the current throughout a lifetime is surely exhausting. Bitterness and suspicion can grow out of a sense of perpetual detachment. He rejected the labels, but Laslo was in turns cynical, pessimistic and contrarian in his expressed views and assessment of the state of things. Nevertheless, I detected signs of optimism and hopefulness, as well. Beneath Laslo's negativity and unhappiness, there was a man in search of connection with others. Here was a person who could be easily delighted by a talking clock and the "undo" function on his computer. Yes, he had been a man of large appetites (no small bites of apple for him) and passions, but I observed that he was capable of gallantry and respect in close friendships. Since his wife (whom he divorced) and (more recent) fiancée were dead and his son distant and troubled, Laslo found himself very alone except for his secretary's visits. He felt that his 'forced' move to a second cottage in the Park (when in his early 80s) removed him from meaningful contact with his former neighbors, and he had not been able to summon the energy to make new friends since then. At times, he could not break out of his long-held dogmas to do what might improve the quality of his life. Thus, he believed that carrying insurance was a worthless bother and his refusal to buy it rendered him incapable of using his power (electric wheel) chair outside of his cottage walls.

Although Laslo complained of having little success with his computer, he in fact, accomplished more than some others in the Park (such as, Helmut R. and Myrtle L.) whose assessments of failure were more accurate. It was not for lack of trying that Laslo was unable to achieve his major goals with regard to computing. He undertook his various responsibilities wholeheartedly, whether they be managing his investments or his diet, in an effort to stay healthy. I have no doubt that he worked just as diligently on learning how to use a computer and on his explorations of the Internet. He was willing to invest money and time and persevere in the belief that his learning curve for this digital technology would eventually flatten out. He tried to enlist the assistance of the Park sanctioned tutorial service but found that wanting. He tried to get help through the computer club and couldn't hear enough. He sought out my help which he said was useful but I was seldom there to assist him. Possibly his gender interfered with his making more requests for help from the men who ran the club and visited the homes of many members. Or possibly, his need for "autonomy" made it difficult to seek help from any source. In any event, Laslo must be given credit for trying and persisting in the face of his frustration. Many others such as Neva Evans' husband, were unwilling to risk failure and loss of esteem and

refused any contact with this technology. After several years of nearly solitary struggle, Laslo had the wisdom to hire an assistant in order to continue. He only threatened to jettison his computer; in fact he eventually replaced it with a new one.

Scholars in the field of human-computer interaction are aware of the issue of frustration among computer users and have reported on the subject. One states,

Computers have many beneficial impacts, but unfortunately, frustration is a universal experience for computer users. The annoyances of losing work when a crash occurs, struggling to understand an error message, or spending too much time to clear spam and viruses have become symbolic of the struggles associated with modern technologies. Computers can be the cause of many problems, and usually at the worst time possible. Some problems stem from the users lack of knowledge, poor training, or unwillingness to read instructions or take tutorials. Often frustration results from flaws in the computer hardware, software, networking, troubling interactions among components supplied by diverse manufacturers, or the result of malicious actions by other users. (Ceaparu et al. 2003, 1)

These authors called (somewhat hopefully) for the measurement of “frustrating experiences over time to determine whether progress is being made by software developers, trainers and users.”

Their proposed coping ideas are unfortunately mostly computer dependent—help desks, knowledge bases, online help, and social forms of help by email, chat, instant messaging or online communities” (20). These are the very resources that frustrated users like Laslo were unable to access.

On this same topic of frustration, there is a website dedicated to the subject of “computer rage” which *seems* to be satirical.

Problem: Computer rage is becoming a big problem in our world today. Men and women are taking out their frustrations on the computer; and unfortunately, sometimes misdirecting it to other people. In the work place and at the home, more and more people are smashing their computer screens, beating on the keyboard, and throwing the computer out the window. What is to be done? Should we calm the user, control their behavior, and channel their anger to different outlets?

Solution: Rather than bottling up the frustration with technology and entering into ‘techno-frustration denial,’ we propose to let the user vent in safe, controlled, and vicarious ways. (“Computer Rage” n.d.)

The results of an online survey included on this site lists the pros and cons of acts of violence perpetuated against machines. The pros include the release of anger through venting, aggression towards objects rather than people and the reduction of “inventory of old equipment and increase purchase of new . . .” (“Computer Rage” n.d.). Although Laslo found the issue to be no laughing matter, he might have found some comfort in knowing that he was not the only person to envision pitching his computer through his windows.

There were many *visible* factors that disrupted any course of smooth sailing that Laslo might have anticipated for becoming digitally literate. These factors began and continued during his critical initial period of learning:

- A broken arm followed by two hand/wrist surgeries.
- The loss of one residence and relocation to another.
- The loss of a close female friend; continued estrangement from his son.
- Declining vision, hearing, touch senses.
- An unresolved chronic illnesses and the lack of support by doctors regarding treatment.
- The rejection by the Park administration to consider his eventual shift to A.L.

The *invisible* factors that interfered with Laslo's progress with his computer were those that existed within his mind. If other Park residents were not as undone by their frustration as Laslo it may have been because their expectations of themselves were not so high or all-encompassing. Laslo had faced many career setbacks but always managed to land on his feet and find the means to support his family so he had good reason to view himself as competent and capable. But these life struggles brought forth in Laslo a combativeness that carried over to his interaction with his computer; it became a contest between man and machine. In this battle the machine assumed the status of an entity towards which Laslo could feel resentment and anger. In addition, Laslo may not have been temperamentally suited to acquiring and building on the many small steps entailed in computing. Intolerant of small bites, he wanted to be able to reach his goals with just a few "key punches." And, lastly, Laslo might well have surpassed his critical learning period for the vocabulary of this technology.

A summary of Laslo's various statements of the benefits versus the liabilities of his computing experience, reveals the imbalance.

*Benefits of computers:*

- provide access to information
- can serve as a memory aid
- can bring order to life
- can execute brain work
- can provide information superior to that in libraries and more quickly
- can connect users to world-wide network
- can provide therapy through games and entertainment

*Liabilities of computers:*

- demand heavy investment of money for purchase and training
- bring disorder to one's life
- generate feeling of pressure to use
- lead to technocracy run by an elite
- cause widespread psychopathology resulting from rampant frustration
- take user out of the life cycle
- deprive user of his personality
- turn user into a hermit
- reduce intelligence through playing games
- forced to use to access needed information via unfamiliar means
- obviate previous skills for learning by changing procedures of information gathering
- distract from societal events
- prompt and/or allow user to hide from life

Patience tends to dissipate in many people as they age—both as a result of decreasing brain flexibility and emotional resilience and due to the realization of one's shortening life span. Laslo's anxiety in the face of the slowness of his e-mail connection illustrated a major problem for elderly computer users in the early incarnations of personal computers. Typical PCs and dial-up connections lacked robustness and speed, and Senior computer users were easily discouraged when "nothing" appeared to be happening on their screens. Computer programs were also at fault for failing to more clearly explain or signal activity and/or cause for delay. The untrained older user had little reason to marvel over the rapid development of digital technology or to appreciate the incipient nature of it. Park residents all too often shouldered the blame for their computing problems, assuming personal ineptitude rather than clumsy programming. This continual blocking of goals and failure to achieve often resulted in the cessation of desire for further exploration. Like Laslo, others either walked away from their computer or they turned its use over to someone else. And that, too, is a survival strategy in the final years of the elderly, which are devoted to the serious endeavor of wrapping up their lives. Laslo, at least, wanted to "go in peace."

The complaints of aging individuals regarding the rapid passage of time, about dwindling time, wasted time and lost time are common enough to sound hackneyed. However, until each of

us is similarly beset due, for example, to old age or terminal diagnoses, the depth of this loss cannot be understood or simulated in the concrete way that the loss of vision, hearing, or touch can be simulated as a means of sensitizing researchers to the plight of those suffering from such conditions (Walker 2008). Laslo's anger was palpable at having to spend half a day (having made those Park trips, I verify that this is the case) getting to the grocery store and back and a different half day getting to a pharmacy and back and again another half day visiting the doctor. (These trips were done for the residents in groups so no side trips were allowed.) But his complaints about the time he wasted on computer use, though often intense, were spoken more in a tone of anguished resignation. He was, after all, dealing with *his* perceived "ineptitude" rather than that of the Park procedures. He grieved both sources, however, and continual grief over unrectifiable loss is enervating, at the least, and illness-making, at the worst.

Laslo was out of synch with his immediate social order. He was at odds with the group-oriented life of Flamingo Park and perhaps would be so in any retirement community that was conservative by design. His restlessly analytical mind always in search of deeper truths prevented him from embracing anyone else's point of view, even those of his like-minded Park critics. Just his willingness to merely consider all positions made him suspect. Thus, his fellow resident Barbara Howard had, despite her liberal political convictions, a negative view of Laslo because of his association (by virtue of being on their publication distribution list) with the malcontents of the Park. Laslo was disinclined to adopt the "love it or leave it" attitude (one kind of survival strategy) of many of his fellow residents. He had been happy leading a truly rootless existence aboard a boat for a large portion of his life. How tragic then to be in his final years confined to a small cottage becoming ever more housebound.

In the absence of admitting Laslo or other similarly marooned individuals to Assisted Living, the Park needed to design a program of benign intervention for them. It is not enough merely to determine the status of life or death by waiting for each resident to activate an electronic call button upon awakening. While not infringing on residents' privacy, there should be a more pro-active approach to either drawing some residents into community life or bringing community life to them. Park social planners and activities directors plan for groups. There is no program in the Park that is designed to visit independent shut-ins, to engage them in even a pleasant conversation or perhaps something more ambitious like an autobiography project. Although Laslo had recently taken to barring his door against unannounced security personnel—

an act that could be construed as anti-social—there was also evidence that he would welcome more interaction with fellow residents. He did, after all, attend, as recently as 2009, the VIP meeting in the Assembly Building. Residing in and managing a semi-cloistered community, such as Flamingo Park, entails a delicate balancing act. All participants must remain mindful of the need to both maintain autonomy of action and to give and receive the *care* in the “continuing care residential community” concept.

“Living isn’t safe,” Laslo once said. His opinion was that there was no point in avoiding risky behavior at the end of one’s life. In this spirit, I would like to imagine Laslo hurtling along at 4 MPH in his power chair, brazening across the RR tracks and intersections. If only he had the insurance to make it out of the Park. . . .



## CHAPTER 8

### A PROFILE IN EXPLORATION: ALBERT SWENSON (AGED 83–91)

Al's description (in 1996), in my field notes was:

He is tall and rather lanky. He has an open, pleasant face with a ready smile. Outgoing and sociable, he likes to joke and tease. He obviously likes to instruct and is at ease, standing before a room full of people; he does not hesitate to express his opinion but neither does he need to be in the spotlight. A few of the men refer to him as "Swen," but most call him "Al."

Although I had spoken with Al Swenson, in the 1996 meeting of the Computer Club, we did not arrange an interview until three years later. So, in **1999**, we had our **first talk**. As Al had time only in the evening and did not want to disturb his wife, we agreed to meet at Barbara Howard's cottage where I was staying during my time in the Park. We sat at a table on her sun porch while Barbara remained inside, reading a book in her living room. He had promised me a half hour of his time but when that had elapsed he said he could stay another twenty minutes.

Since my time with Al was limited, I used a more formal question/answer format to begin with. "What is your understanding of the Internet?" was my first question.

The Internet is the final culmination of the transfer of data and information that started first with the Phoenicians who developed written language. It permits the rapid dispersion of information which increases the effectiveness of society. . . . Right now and maybe for the foreseeable future, the Internet will be primarily accessed by the higher intellect average than the norm.

If my first question introduced me to Al's interest in the broad picture, my second question revealed his penchant for elaboration, "What does the Internet have to offer the Seniors?"

Well, first of all, as you become so-called 'Senior' as normally conceived as a Senior, you normally think of a person retired and no longer working. What I'm getting at is, people who don't have much to do. And the other thing they don't have much to challenge them. Looking at TV is no challenge. So I think computers—if the person is willing to devote study to it, will help them to be, not only keep abreast of things and whatnot, but I think will help their self-esteem by being able to, in a sense, not conquer, but be able to actually utilize the computer in the way it hopefully should be used.

Finally I asked, "Is there anything else about the Internet that would be particularly helpful to the Senior population?"

[That] reminds me that 'Senior' encompasses a broad spectrum of interests and backgrounds. And so a Senior can, if he learns how to use a computer properly, particularly search vessels and whatnot to locate information that I think they would find interesting to them perhaps because of their background or something they wanted to explore.

That third question and Al's response persuaded me that a less formal format and a more relaxed mode of discourse would better suit his frame of mind. I asked Al to tell me how he got started with computing.

Al: Well, first of all, I'm an amateur radio operator. And some years ago we developed in the amateur field a means . . . of converting analog information into digital and sending it out by short wave. . . . I was in the Navy MARS . . . and a particular phase of that called the "afloat group," where we maintained communications with personnel at sea with their family at home. We did this by means of phones. . . . We had an old Commodore [computer] that did this. It worked fine, did a good job and that's where my computer interest started. . . .

NL: Again, a telecommunications device. And that remains your interest doesn't it?

Al: My particular interest in computers now is primarily helping the people out here, believe it or not. The biggest joy you can get is to have a grandma send an e-mail to her grand children. They can always pick up the phone but you must understand the psyche of this. Suddenly, grandma or grandpa, in the eyes of the grandchildren, has been elevated in the level of 'with it.' And so, they get a big kick out of it. . . . It's a little silly to say you have to have three thousand dollars just for a computer to send e-mail but—.

Al's first explorations with the Internet began when he started "accessing information" through SLIN, a Sunland area network of libraries. He had been using this service for three years without any difficulty. When Al learned that he could gain access to libraries in other countries as well as local ones, he was inspired to do some research.

I had a great uncle who was apparently a professor in Sweden at a university. . . . And I was able to get into the library in this university but only by trying this and that and whatnot . . . And I got a list of all their professors . . . [and] found one professor who had the same last name as mine with an e-mail address. So I sent him an e-mail. . . . But, it was so much fun, playing around. I try to get the people here to play around and try things and whatnot. Don't get so—everything has to be so mechanical. You'll learn by trying different things. You won't wreck the computer.

The last time Al had been in an actual library was three months earlier when he picked up the books he had requested through the SLIN system. Did he miss going to the library?

No, not really . . . There was always a mystique. . . . Something very nice about a library. People have common goals together. But I don't really miss it that much. . . . And so if you're really doing research . . . you have a multiplicity of places you can visit just with your computer. Compare that to having to get in the car and run from each library to another to check and see what they have.

Knowing that Al advised all Computer Club members to use AOL for e-mail service, I asked him if he had tried other Internet connections besides AOL and he assured me that he had sampled a variety including CompuServ, Microsoft and AT&T. But he continued to find America OnLine to be the easiest to use, and for online searching he always started with Yahoo and supplemented it with Alta Vista. For news and current events he relied on the *Wall Street Journal*, ABC TV news and was a "big advocate of Public Television." *A Prairie Home Companion* was the one program that he listened to on the radio. Would he consider reading online publications for news, I wondered?

I read them a little bit and they're fine. But I have difficulty looking at a screen to read. I guess I'm too old. But I still like the idea of reading through, pausing when I want to and whatnot. . . . But, in general I don't go to find news on the Internet.

Al estimated that he spent three to four hours a day at his computer and that included playing with a “flight simulator” game to which he was devoted. He started his computing at 6 a.m. by checking his e-mail and at mid-day, he linked up with his daughter in the Midwest and at night with his son, at that time in NY. Did his wife ever use the computer at all?

Al: No, I could never get her near it. I still can't.

NL: E-mail is what usually brings people in.

Al: She likes e-mail if I print it up and give it to her. Or, she wants me to send something. But she doesn't want to be bothered with doing it.

At my request, Al outlined his educational and work background for me, starting with college.

I graduated from Purdue [in the late 1930s] and jobs were very hard to get. I did get a job working in a steel mill as what they called a ‘practice engineer’. . . . and [then] the draft came up. I decided to go in and get my year over with. So five years later. . . . [he laughed].

After serving in both the Infantry and the Air Force, Al worked as an engineer in the Midwest. Once his children were through college, he realized his dream of becoming a certified teacher and then taught physics and chemistry for eleven years in a Sunland high school. After that, he finally persuaded his wife to move to Flamingo Park. I remarked that from what I had observed in two Computer Club meetings, it was obvious that he enjoyed teaching. Thinking, then, of the Club, Al described his conception of it.

Oh yeah, we have a lot of fun. . . . We call it the Comic Hour, the Comedy Club. Well, we do enjoy ourselves but as you full well know, every time you want the computer to do exactly what you want it to do, the computer has a mind of its own. . . . So no matter who's putting on the program, we always have something that goes wrong. . . . And, you must remember the fellow who started it is Don McDonald, not me. . . . Don, who's very good on word processing, data base and all that sort of thing, that was his forte. . . . And I came in with a knowledge of the Internet. So between the two of us, we have meshed very good. But he's the one who did all the work . . . and still does most of the work.

Barbara: [calling out to us from the living room] added her two cents, “And you should add that the Club has brought him along too, helped him expand his horizons.”

NL: Got him from at least 3.1 to 95.

Al: No, it got him from DOS! For years, he was—we had to drag him into Windows ‘cause he was always giving programs in DOS and we called it ‘Don's Old System.’ But he took it with a great sense of humor and we had a lot of fun with him.

Since Barbara and Al had occasionally been calling back and forth from the sun porch to the living room, I asked her to join us at her table. We continued to talk about the Club.

NL: Is one of your goals to try to bring, spread the word outside the club?

Al: . . . we have one man who comes once a month—Cody [Peabody] and he's been a help. . . . He has started classes out here and we aren't a class group. We're a club; there's a difference. We may present

something at one time but we have no formal way of presenting information, whereas he has a regular program he uses. Now, it would be our hope, of course, that he would get enough people learning. We have people who wouldn't come to ours even if we had a beginner's group because they are afraid to come but who would go to a class. All I can say is we hope that the Club continues and we act as a source of information.

Barbara: Well, since we started, quite a few people who came to the Club now have computers which at first they didn't. 'Cause they were afraid. 'Am I really going to use it? Or, am I going to be able to use it?'

Al: If I buy it, am I going to be able to learn it? . . . We have a cross section of some pretty bright people—well above average. But you still find among them, [they're] a little scared of that beast. And, of course, if you get into the beast you get clipped a few times, you get scared anyway. And you have to be able to persevere in spite of having difficulties. . . . Some years ago . . . before I was out here, I had several people who were interested in computers. I'd say, 'Well now wait a minute. . . . Why do you want a computer?' 'Well, I don't know really why.' I said, 'Well unless you can figure out why you want a computer, you're not a candidate to buy one.'

Barbara: It's not worth the frustration.

AL: But we have some excellent schools . . . [around] here that give you computer courses. When I first started, I went to [a high school in a nearby town] in the summer school between my teaching.

To Barbara's later complaint that things in her computer kept changing leading to endless questions, Al remarked,

Well, no, the problem is—if you just used computers every day, word processing and everything else, there'd be no problems. Because as they come . . . [you would] immediately solve them. But our problem is we work on something and then we don't do anything on it for another month or so. And, we go back in and at our age, retention is not the very best—.

**Insights:** Al Swenson offered a visionary definition (beginning with the Phoenicians) of the Internet which sounded rehearsed, as though he had delivered it many times before. I think he believed these sentiments, however, and that his later use of the word “vessel” in place of “engine” to describe search programs, reflected his exalted idea of the Internet as a holder for human knowledge. But what can be made of his idea that it required “high intellect” to use? It's hard to know whether he chose to believe this as a validation of his intelligence, schooling and experience or because he had discovered through teaching the subject that the process of using computers was so complex as to defy “average” human intelligence. If the latter, it would be just cause for grandparents to improve their self- esteem through the eyes of their grandchildren, as he suggested would be the result of acquiring computer know-how. But isn't this a remarkable idea—that mature adults would have to concern themselves with their 'esteem' in their eighth and ninth decades of living?

Al's advice about studying the subject of computers (*prior* to purchasing them) either in books or class contexts was practical in the 1990s when the cost of computing equipment was

prohibitive. It might not have been an ideal strategy, however, for his age cohorts whose life timelines may not have allowed for such deliberate pre-planning and/or whose earlier schooling experiences may have been less than positive. It also flies in the face of a “hands-on” learning approach, that his fellow Computer Club member, Neva Evans, said she needed.

Until Al described the difference between the Computer *Club* and computer *classes*, I had not appreciated the distinction (at least in his mind ). Nor, did the members of the Club whom I was interviewing. These members received emotional support in a relaxed atmosphere of camaraderie and light-heartedness. They also established contact with people who were willing to visit them at home and help with individual computing problems. All of these services were free of charge, whereas Cody Peabody’s classes were not free and were a means of meeting at-home clients whom he charged significant fees for such tutoring. Thus, it was understandable that the Club was the first avenue of exploration by I-C tech novices. That was the hand-holding context in which they wished to learn. And as Barbara pointed out, it was the Club experience that inspired some Park residents to purchase computers. Therefore, it was reasonable that they expected that body to continue to be of help in learning how to use them.

It was **2002** when Al and I met for a **second** conversation. He was very excited about the many new discoveries he had made in the recent past. He invited me to come to his apartment in one of the Park high-rise buildings so that he could demonstrate them with his computer. We sat in his study while his wife, Dottie, was getting dressed in another room. I asked if he had been doing anything “exotic” to which he replied, “Yes, very exotic” and so I tried to guess what that might be—voice recognition or perhaps a camera on top of his computer (like Nelson Jones, another Park resident, had) with which he could set up a LAN in the Park? “I have a better one than that,” Al pronounced. But he wouldn’t be hurried by my guessing, telling me, “You’re going to take this in sequence.” We then opened, one by one, the various programs he had been playing with. The first was a “Word a Day” list sent out by the University of Chicago. “And there’s a group of us in the Park who are interested in it and I forward it to them, plus . . . a few others.” Al digressed into a description of how one of the residents, Myrtle Likert, saved every one of these words/messages and had so many that her mail box could hold no more; he refused to return to help her because despite his entreaties, she wouldn’t delete them.

In rapid succession and with nearly breathless excitement, Al gave me a tour and a detailed explanation and background history on Napster, Grokster (which he read about in the *Wall St. Journal*), nodes, and other elements related to the acquisition of online materials. Although he had a play list from Napster of over 1,500 songs, Al realized that doing this had become a legally questionable activity. So, he had turned to Grokster by which to download all of his favorite classic tunes and even radio programs from the 1940s and 1950s. I watched history roll by as we scanned his lists—Artie Shaw, Nat King Cole, The Mills Brothers, Glen Miller, “Deep Purple,” “Dream A Little Dream of Me,” “Fibber McGee and Molly,” Sinatra, Armstrong, Duke Ellington and so much more. The process of downloading was slow, however, so Al selected favorites at night and looked forward to having them when he awoke the next day. Then he burned them to a CD with the external burner that his son had given him. Since Al’s computer was slower than he would have liked, I asked him what operating system he was using. When he said ’98, I asked if he had considered switching to XP.

No, I’d have to get all new programs, whole new machine. It’s [i.e. his computer] not too old. It’s a couple of years old. You know what they did? They all play games with us. And Microsoft and all the manufacturers set this up. They won’t tell you that but they’ve set it up so that all of the augmented parts have to be XP capable. So I can’t convert this. [repeats this phrase twice more] Buy the software, probably won’t work at all. And because maybe my monitor or maybe my hard drive . . . my modem doesn’t work with it—.

Reluctantly, Al shut off one of the tunes in order to move us to the “number one . . . other thing I’ve gotten into to—MSN Bridge. . . . You play Bridge with people all over the world.” Al described his start with this card game. “My sister was eleven years older than I am. Got me playing Bridge when I was twelve, because one of the girl friends wouldn’t show up. . . . Most of the time Bridge starts in colleges.” Al signed into the program and showed me the many features. There were “social rooms” for differing levels of expertise, people could play or just kibitz and if a player dropped out, a “robot” took his place and so on. Al was enthralled but he moved on to his next new thing. Apparently some HAM operators had once again set up—or reinvigorated with fiber optic cables—networks for world-wide connections with other HAM operators. Al attempted to explain to me how the older system of repeaters and radio waves had been expanded through the Internet. Only licensed HAM operators could use them, according to Al.

Al: See, when you first sign in and register in this program, you give them your ham call.

NL: So you’re combining two technologies. You could do it strictly with the ham radio except the distance might be too great.

Al: Not only that, I can’t put out an antennae.

NL: . . . You're overriding that obstacle with the new technology. But you're all in a mindset of HAM operators. You use, 'over and out' and all that.

Al: Once I get on there, we revert to our normal speech.

He tried to demonstrate the HAM world by choosing an operator in Sheffield, England but the man did not respond. As we waited, Al described the conversations he had had with two people in Australia. Finally he said, "There are people all over the world waiting to hear from me." I felt compelled to ask Al how many hours a day he was using his computer.

Al: Well it depends on who you talk to, me or my wife. . . . I really am—Lately it's been more time because I've been collecting all these songs. But other than that, it may be two or three hours a day. . . . Well, I mean, maybe now it's five. . . . Yeah, and a lot of that is just—see, they send everything to me. And I send it to everybody else.

NL: You're the clearing house, the re-distributor.

Al: And a good deal of the time is spent with, 'Al, I don't know—How do we do this? How do we do that?' And I'll have to research it, just like these sort of things. . . .

NL: Do you like that?

Al: Yes. I like helping people, frankly; I wouldn't be doing it otherwise.

Given Al's history with computers, it was obvious that he needed no help from his offspring with computing. In fact, he had given both his son and daughter used computers (one a Commodore) in the 1970s. They both took to them right away, "duck to water."

And not only that, but with our daughter—their kids who were at that age—teenagers—jumped into it. And so between all of them, they all started playing with it and whatnot. They were the only ones in town that had a computer. So they learned from one another and then they started getting better ones. . . . Now they're both into XPs. They're beyond me and I'm not interested. . . . They have their whole house—they have their own LAN within their house. They got computers on one floor and down in the basement. . . .

And there was another new thing involving his children—"We're all on IM, Instant Messaging." Al expressed surprise that I didn't know much about it and filled me in on the history of its development showing me that his son was at that moment online. He said that they had all managed to have conference calls with IM by creating a little chat room. Al expressed what he liked about it and how it was superior to e-mail; it provided a connection in "instant time." Speaking of his children reminded Al of an incident from his earlier fatherhood period when his children were still growing up. "When their teenage friends would come over and visit when I was there, they said, 'Don't ask him a question. He'll tell you more than you want to know.'"

Al showed me other things such as his "file cabinet" in which his computer files were organized and a glossary on AOL terminology that he had made for Computer Club members.

Our conversation circled back to Flamingo Park and its residents and we discussed the meaning of terms such as “senior citizen” and “elderly.” We came to no agreement as to how to define them, and Al insisted that people were too variable and that the terms did not apply to him in any meaningful way. Once again, he attempted to characterize the populous for me.

And we’re a very representative community in the sense of the broad spectrum of ages. Not representative with respect to the previous life experiences. . . . Most people out here have been in a more upper level, middle-class experience. Not necessarily monetary but on the basis of their lifestyle.

I remarked that there was a full program of activities and events for the residents, to which Al responded,

This place—I told my wife one time, ‘I got to go back and go to work again so I have some time. My life is killing me. . . . And there have been so many things that can be done out here . . . that are interesting to many people. . . .[and] that weren’t readily available before. Right at hand and you’re part of it. . . . We don’t have to get [out of the Park]. . . .

Dottie had finished dressing and we all moved to the living room. I was interested to learn what Al’s wife had to say about his computer habits but Al kept hold of the conversational reins.

NL: Sometime I would like to hear about computer widowhood, Dottie.

Al: She starts with amateur radio widowhood. [Al reminisces about his days and many hours of working on HAM radio at home but then returns to the present.] This is *her* deal. [He gestures towards the TV.] Did we tell you about TiVo the other night? It’s her computer; it’s called TiVo. It has a hard drive in it . . . This can record all kinds of things that she needs to record . . . and keep track of what she’s interested in. . . . Our son . . . had it and we went down and bought one.

As I collected my things in preparation for leaving, I admired some of their family photos and remarked to Al that I couldn’t recognize him in their wedding photo. Alluding to our discussion on the issue, he remarked, “I’ve become a Senior Citizen.” Before I could comment on that, Dottie shared a secret with me.

Dottie: I’ll tell you, but don’t tell anybody else. I’m going to turn 80 this year. I don’t like it. I just hate to say it. We’ve been married 60 years this August so people can figure it out.

NL: [looking again at the wedding photo] Isn’t this lovely. You look like a classic southern beauty here.

Al: She was. She is.

Dottie continued on the subject of weddings, telling me about the group ceremony in the Park four years earlier when all residents who had been married fifty or more years gathered to renew their vows. Recalling their original wedding ceremony in a military chapel where Al was stationed, he said to her, “You were nervous.”



**Insights:** Al was the proverbial kid in the candy shop when it came to the endless discoveries he was making for things to do to, on and with his computer. He truly appreciated the skill and intelligence involved in the design of programs and apparatuses he acquired. And, he was literally overjoyed with the discovery that he could obtain (and retain) cherished aspects from his younger life, such as classic movies, radio programs and—best of all—music. From his casual comments, I understood that Al’s discoveries had many sources including media articles and mentions, his own online exploration, his son’s suggestions on new things to look at, and conversations with other Park computer users. Most of all, I wish I had asked how he had learned about the group of HAM operators who had formed an online community. What a remarkable phenomenon—people revitalizing an older technology which was a vital means of communication in wartime, and using it *through* the latest technology. It was a combining of technologies, a building on technology and a reshaping of the old through the new.

The anecdote that Al told ‘on’ himself about his children’s advice to their peers to ‘beware of an incurable instructor on the loose’ is endearing as well as amusing. It is indicative of a man who was self aware and comfortable in his own skin. Al’s desire to impart information was the force that drove him to devote countless hours to the creation and distribution of his many “Swen” lists that he distributed to Computer Club members and family and friends around the country. While it is true that some of his postings were jokes and funny stories, an equal number contained information on technology, cultural discoveries, university research and so on. His goal for the word-of-the-day postings was purely didactic, stemming from Al’s desire to improve the minds of his fellow citizens.

It’s interesting to speculate on what part of his teaching persona might have been formed by his (much older) sister’s use of his brain for her Bridge games. Surely that was not her only instructional interaction with him. Neither of them could have imagined that he would one day be playing in digital rooms with remote partners located all over the world. Yet, that childhood experience was antecedent to his global Bridge interactions.

Even an intrepid computer user such as Al Swenson, was disinclined to upgrade his operating system from an earlier version of Windows to XP. Given all the various applications he then had on his desktop, it would have been time consuming at best, and expensive and possibly confusing, at worst, to switch. This was a repeated refrain of Park computer users—their despair at having to learn a new system as technology companies pushed them along. Al

perceived the issue as one of being toyed with by a conspiratorial gang of youthful software designers.

According to Al, his wife Dottie had her own computer in the form of a juiced up DVD player known as TiVo. By so defining it, he could absolve himself of some of the guilt he might have felt over his long hours of sequestration in "his" room (i.e. study). He acknowledged this absence from their joint lives when he responded to my question about the number of computer hours he logged each day by saying his wife might have a different estimate than his. Al observed that his wife's technological widowhood went back many years, starting with his role of amateur radio operator. He may have been implying that Dottie was (or should have been) accustomed to it. One might ask whether her disinclination to use computers was a result of this aspect of their family culture. Al's computer use was and always had been a thing apart from her section of their domestic world. A different side of that scenario was Al's importation of computers into the household for his children's use. Wherever their mother was in relation to the network of technology that Al created in her home, her children were being positioned in a rarified segment of their social order, as the early adaptors.

Our **third conversation in 2005** was once again in the Swenson's apartment. I was hoping to inspire Al to reflect on and summarize his explorations with I-C technologies. At that time, he was one month away from his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday. So I jumped right in. "What have computers done for you?"

Well, they've given me another outlook on life in a way because you get to do things you never could have done before without a computer. So in that regard, it's given me a lot of interests. And [it's] easy to obtain information compared to having to go to, struggle through a library and everything else. . . . and it's a challenge. It's given me something to challenge myself again, to learn. . . . That's pretty much it. It's an interest factor, something that keeps me interested. Something to do in my old age. And, I guess, the point of it was a little easier than reading.

Al was not so forthcoming in his response when I asked him whether computing helped his cognitive abilities; he asked me how one would measure it. He had no theory on the matter but accepted what the experts said about 'using or losing it.' Saying he couldn't "verify" it, he guessed it had been helpful. Did he think that his computing improved his connectivity with his family, was my next question.

Oh, yes. In the sense that with e-mail and instant messages, you contact them far more than you would ever normally. We also normally call—our son's in [another city]. We call him every two weeks and our daughter in [the Midwest] every two weeks. But that's a longer conversation, a little different type. In the meantime, things come up, and we pass little messages. They're usually short answers.

“No Grokster,” was Al’s reply to my question about his music downloading. He explained why.

Al: And I’ll tell you why. After getting over a thousand records, a thousand songs, I now have far more than I can listen to anyway. And . . . half the fun on that was finding old songs that you could hardly ever hear anymore, but I remember from the ‘30s or ‘40s and find them available. . . .

NL: So what are you doing with your computer, then . . . ?

Al: Well, not as much as I used to, really. Mostly, it’s e-mail. I do a little financial work on it.

I asked Al if he used a program like Quicken and he said that he had developed his own spreadsheets years ago and he then suggested that people could perform tasks at a simpler level than what was afforded through computer programs.

You want to be careful in computers not to do more than what is needed to be done. In other words, if this satisfies my needs, why go buy Quicken and relearn, learn how to learn something else. You go all through the ramifications. . . . And what you have is taking care of your needs. This is a little bit of danger of people with computers.

Al’s new find about which he was spreading the word through the Park was Netflix. “It’s unbelievable. Have you done it? Well, you must do it. For \$17 a month, I can have here movies in my possession at any one time. [He continued with the details of the service.] I enjoy it a lot. It’s gotten my wife and I back together again. It’s gotten me out of the computer room into her TV room.” As to Al’s sources for news and current events, he said he wasn’t “paying that much attention. . . .”

It’s what AOL throws at me as a highlight of some kind. . . . Of course, you must remember that it’s already condensed. Now this is not a good way to research if you’re really interested in learning something. But it gives you an overview of what’s going on. . . . And, I’ll look at a newspaper in the morning. But I’m really not that much interested.

At that time, Al was subscribing to only one finance-related publication.

I personally don’t, just don’t read like I used to. I’ve gotten old enough so that I recognize a lot of it, doesn’t mean anything. I don’t know why. I just—maybe . . . the computer takes a little more of my time away. I don’t know.

The only online business that Al could recall doing was some stock trading and a few book purchases on Amazon. He guessed that he was spending two hours a day at his computer, or “maybe three on occasions.”

But I do, on occasion, get on Google which I think is just fabulous. Almost any subject matter you want, it has something on it. And some of those are extensive. You can get a whole book. I remember reading Pines, Paine’s rather, *Age of Reason* many years ago. . . . But I’ve been reading that and a few other things that I’ll read in there that are of interest to me. . . . I got the whole thing on there. . . . Google just sends you to it.

The corporate culture of Google fascinated Al and he talked about that and the backgrounds of some of the Google designers. At last, I asked Al, “What’s your future with computers?”

Nothing more than what I’m doing. You got to be careful. You don’t know what the future of computers is. So you can’t say what you’re going to do in the future. You have to wait to see what the computers will do.

When I told Al that I had heard from the new director of the Computer Club that Al was promoting a wireless environment he explained his reasoning at some length. Based on the fact that he had heard about plans to make entire cities such as San Francisco and Philadelphia wireless he wondered why Flamingo Park could not put an antennae on top of one of their high rises and do the same. Or, why not install a fiber optic cable for a broadband connection every time they put new wiring into a unit? He realized that one snag would be that since so few people in the Park were then “involved with computers,” there would be objections to levying a universal fee. He did not succeed in interesting Park administrators in his plans due to the expense. Al agreed entirely with my reaction, “it’s incredibly short-sighted not to do it because each new generation of people coming in [to the Park] are going to be computer savvy.”

Al: And this’ll be a great selling point. . . . If you could say that we have broadband throughout both buildings and WiFi and whatever system, would be a big selling point.

NL: . . . a lot of peoples’ computers are not going to be capable of doing a wireless—Some computers I’ve seen on this trip are pretty old . . .

Al: Oh, I know. But see, the thing is, they’re unto themselves. You don’t have everybody who wants broadband. I don’t have broadband. . . . I got into a fight with Comcast. They wanted to charge me for something they said they weren’t going to charge me for. So I told them to—. Well anyway that’ll be a problem for the individual to work out, not the Park.

For the rest of our time together Al and I ruminated over various topics such as online shopping which he declared was a “miniscule” percent of the national retail business and we spent a good deal of time discussing the feasibility of the Google plan to digitize all of the books in the world. Al then informed me that he’d read that librarians were saying it was hard to keep track of all the information that was on the Internet.

Anyway how are we going to handle it? How are we going to get all this stuff that’s on the Internet and make it available for the future when it’s fleeting? Whew!! It’s gone here, it’s gone there. . . . After all, what’s a library? A library is a place to retain knowledge. . . . My question to you is, what [are] you librarians doing about this?

After a little more tussling with this subject in which we spoke of indexing, natural language searching, metadata, key words and search engines, Al concluded the discussion with a rhetorical question followed by an intriguing non sequitur.

Who caused all this? We with limited minds want to know. Well, it if hadn't been for the Arabs inventing the zero, how could we have zeros and ones?

**Insights:** Even though Al and his children were consummate and devoted computer users, they continued to utilize the technology of the telephone for a portion of their regular news sharing. Apparently they recognized the need for the sound of each other's voices. Their behavior was fully comprehensible to one social scientist who addressed the "unintended consequences of technology," to wit, the loss of interpersonal connections and the "Internet's potential role in the continuing decline of arenas for face-to-face relationships. Whatever wonderful things the wired and wireless will bring, a hug is not one of them." (Nie 2001, 433-4). He offered this rationale for the continued use of the telephone by Al and his family.

Face-to-face and even telephone communication among . . . friends, and family are often about matters of affect. . . . ; eye contact, body language, facial expressions, vocalizations . . . and giggles are the fundamentals of our evolutionary socioemotional well-being. . . . [T]he telephone, unlike e-mail . . . preserves a number of emotionally verbal cues and intonations. It is not that well-written e-mail is incapable of expressing important emotions; it is simply that written communication is not equivalent to face-to-face interaction. (432)

What neither Nie nor Al appreciated in the early 2000s was how another generation of technology was going to make all of this possible except for the hugging. I was to learn about that in my last visit with Al, in 2008.

There were positive things that Al had to say about the value of computers in his life; they had given him challenges, activity, a novel point of view, interests, a pastime for his older years, greater frequency of contact with family members and ease of access to information. But his ardor seemed to have cooled during the three years since we had last spoken at length. He had obtained through his computer all the media and music he could use and felt he had no more need to pursue those interests. What's more, the thrill of the hunt for them had abated. Al expressed an opinion that his computer use ate up his time for other things such as reading. He was more and more losing interest in the news of the outside world, finding that the news nuggets he received through his mail server sufficient.

Al did not wish to expend energy in learning a new program (such as Quicken) if it wasn't necessary. He sounded a warning about overextending oneself with computing, complicating one's life unnecessarily through the introduction of programs without which one could accomplish the same basic skills. Although Al couldn't quite perceive his future with computing or that of the technology, in general, he continued to advocate for it on behalf of others. Apparently, he had expended time and energy trying to persuade administrators of

Flamingo Park that they needed to upgrade their I-C technological infrastructure. He could only hope that his arguments had made some impact.

There were two subjects about which Al spoke with enthusiasm and interest and one was the company and services of Google. He had perceived the magnitude of their endeavor and ambitions and had tapped into the concerns of those struggling with the question of how to bring order to the information Google was amassing. He felt it was the responsibility of libraries to find solutions and seemed anxious about the increasingly elusive control over information.

Even though not pursuing the subject with his computer, Al had by no means given up his passion for classic cinema. He had found a new way to enjoy old movies through Netflix and was pleased with the convenience of a delivery system that was external to his computer. But the critically important aspect of this delivery system was, to be sure, that it extricated him from the isolation of his computer/room. He was reunited with his wife, sharing a media experience in the same room. That he had at last discovered the goodness of this in his older years must have been gratifying for them both.

Al readily agreed to meet with me during my visit to Flamingo Park in **2008**; it was to be our **fourth** conversation. He invited me to join him and his wife, Dottie, at one of their evening meals.

In the Dining Hall. The first thing Al said as I sat down at their table at the appointed hour of 4:30 was, “Don’t talk to me about computers! I have had to reformat my computer four times in the last week.” Al wasn’t sure how it had failed but he recounted his difficulties with various help desk staff in India. He couldn’t hear the “soft female voices” and after three days of trying he asked for a supervisor to help with the re-installation of his hard drive. He was grateful, he told me, that his four-year old Dell still had XP because the Vista operating system had, in his opinion, many problems and failed a lot. At one point in his diatribe, Al mentioned having had the urge to throw his computer out of the window.

After expressing his frustration about that process a little longer, Al changed the subject exclaiming, “Let me tell you about Skype!” He told me that being able to communicate with Skype was quite wonderful for his family as there were members living far apart who are not able to travel. Skype, he contended, created a sense of *presence*, a feeling that his family was with him there at home. Al had found some kind of Skype chat board with people from around

the world who wanted to speak English. Through that he had had conversations with a “girl” from China and a guy from Algeria (who had hastened to assure Al that he was not a terrorist even though his sister wore “the whole outfit,” as Al described it). An activity to which Al was looking forward was the future possibility of playing Bridge online through some kind of Skype connection in which people could see each other’s faces.

While talking about Skype, Al mentioned several times that he was predisposed to like this form of communication due to his early experiences with phone patches in the military.

I liken it a lot with the HAM radio. I don’t have HAM radio but I worked with the Navy—For years I ran phone patches between sailors and sailorettes at sea. . . . The Navy had special frequencies . . . just on the other side of our HAM bands, all controlled by the FCC. . . . [W]ith the HAM gear a group of us worked—there was a Navy, Army, Air Force—MARS, Military Affiliated Radio System—.

Before Al could pursue the subject of phone patching, one of his favorite topics, our attention was diverted by our dining table servers. Our resumed conversation had segued to the topic of the digital transmission for television. Al evidently felt that my understanding of the subject was flawed because he started to diagram the mechanics of it on a table napkin, starting at the beginning.

You must remember every radio always has a tuner which converts the radio signal no matter what it is into something else, which is more usable—converts it into audio.

He went on talking about frequencies, signals, binary code, cable companies, converters, “Uncle Sam’s” coupon program and much more. Al described how he had to stand up at a recent Park meeting on the subject of digital conversion and correct errors in the explanation by administrators. As he continued on this topic with his usual verve and rapid-fire speech, his wife, Dottie, said little. But she smiled as she watched Al imparting information so enthusiastically. I asked her if she got bored with all these tech discussions and both she and Al assured me that she was “used to it.”

I asked Al if he was involved in any “social networks,” such as MySpace or FaceBook. He said he didn’t know what these were but that some years ago he had had a negative experience with some kind of Internet “message board” where he found people to be “very rude.” He also said he had no experience with I-Pods or M3P players when I asked him about them in conjunction with his great love of music ‘oldies.’ He was perpetually searching for the means for archiving his music in his computer but hadn’t yet explored any of the portable devices. But my question prompted him to tell me of the technological accomplishment of his daughter who had recently completed a Master’s Degree online and planned to pursue a doctoral

degree in the area of music education at least partly online. He assured me that her work was really “good stuff, not bogus.”

With regard to his use of technological devices and developments, Al had this to say.

[T]hat whole concept of finding things . . . and learning them and once I’ve got that accomplishment done, and what not, and—It isn’t that I totally lose interest but something else comes up that’s another new challenge to learn. Now I don’t look at it as a challenge, it just exists. I don’t say, ‘Oh there’s something to challenge me.’ It isn’t that. It is something, well, that’s interesting.

Our dinner conversation was somewhat disjointed by virtue of the noisy dining conditions and at its conclusion I asked Al if he would have any time to meet again during the next few days. He told me how ill Dottie (who had suffered a serious stroke some years back) was and how often they had to travel to health care providers for various treatments and that she was at risk for another stroke. When Al learned that I would be leaving the Park in three days he suggested that we could meet on my last day. I desisted, saying that they needn’t take the time for that given Dottie’s health needs but they both protested. Al said, “No, no, no, I’d love to talk to talk to you,” and Dottie said, “We’d love to see you.”

In the Swensons’ apartment, four days later. Our conversation started in their living room where Dottie joined us in her wheel chair. After some brief chatting, we resumed the discussion started a few days earlier in the Dining Hall. What’s going on with the computer club, I wondered? Al described it as “hit or miss” because “it’s hard to find a subject that can appeal to everyone with very different interests.” He thought it “fell apart” when the two men who then ran it went on a year’s cruise. Nevertheless, these men “know a lot,” in Al’s estimation, and he occasionally attended meetings but not as much as previously. I relayed George Brinkley’s (Computer Club leader) statement that they didn’t even plan to meet during the summer anymore. Al suggested that that was his idea.

I talked to George and . . . said . . . many times we just didn’t have it during the summer because people were away and hiatus type stuff. So that was the reason that there wasn’t much done during the summer. It’s slowed down now, though.

To Al’s knowledge the Computer Club had not yet had a session on Skype and he’d been talking to George about doing one and about how he could demonstrate it.

To really see Skype, you need both parties. What I was thinking was, well George could be there and I could be here and we could demonstrate that to the Club. . . .

Since we were back on the subject of Skype, I mentioned another VOI program. “The first usage of Voice Over Internet that I know of involved no camera and was called Vonage.” Al replied,



“Oh, yeah, I did that twelve years ago.” Rather than question the historical accuracy of that statement, I changed the subject and posed my favorite query.

NL: So here’s my perpetual question: what does the computer mean to you, for you . . . in your life?

Al: Well, it gives you a chance to get in the other room and leave my wife [laughs].

NL: OK, that’s a novel answer.

Al: Well, actually she is not interested at all in computers and really loves TV. And being incapacitated she doesn’t have much else to do. But thank goodness she likes it and she has TiVo and so she looks at her programs. We have some things we look at together. You ever hear of Netflix? And we do that and we have a movie. . . .we can both look at it together. . . . We like much of the old ones because much of the junky stuff these days—we don’t look at them.

His enthusiasm for Netflix undimmed, Al once again explained the mechanics of ordering, receiving, and returning the films. He extolled their voluminous inventory which he had discovered could be accessed online as well.

Al: . . . you don’t even have to have it delivered. On a lot of them you can look at it on your computer. But, I’m limited online. I tried it just once. I wasn’t that interested; I just wanted to try it. And what you do need is a pretty big hard drive. And you need a very fast OS. . . . They just give you part of [the movie]. Because that was all . . . my limitations could handle. So I didn’t mess with it anymore. But our son . . . told us we gotta’ buy a gigabyte hard drive or something. . . . He used to be—in the Navy he started out as a radio operator. . . .

NL: What else does your computer do for you besides get you out of the living room?

Al: Well, first of all, I do use it for financial research. E-mail is big. I . . . don’t do as much as what I was doing officially but if I get some things that I like, look pretty good to a group of computer people, I send it to ‘em. I don’t have the full list [of the Computer Club members] like I used to but I have parts—I send it to ‘em. Music, I like music. Well, I got so much music. Now, I used to steal music but—

NL: I know. Napster, you were big on Napster.

Al: I was a big Napster fan. Until they decided it was illegal. So then they started getting after people and what not. But they don’t do that much anymore because the prices—and kids don’t do it . . . they go buy it for 99 cents.

Now and then, I attempted to bring Al’s wife into our conversation.

NL: Dottie, do you feel like a computer widow?

Dottie: Mmm hmm. It doesn’t bother me.

Al: Because she has this [pointing to the large TV].

NL: Dottie, how come you’re not interested in computing at all?

Dottie: I just never did get interested.

NL [to Al]: You never convinced her—Does she look over your shoulder at all?

Al: No, no except when we go in and Skype. See, I pull her wheelchair in. And then she doesn't talk much. [Dottie laughs] I try to prompt her and they [family members] prompt her to talk—

NL: Well, I think just seeing them and hearing them. . . . That's a great thing for you.

Dottie: Oh yeah.

Al: Oh yeah! And if she does have a question she can raise it. Recently she was on for an hour.

NL: An hour. What does that cost?

Al: That's a big question and I don't understand. They do have V-O-B [voice-over-broadband] for people who want to use the telephone system. There they charge. I've never tried it so I don't know much about it. Those of us—my daughter, my son-in-law and my son—we, all of us, we can't understand how they can provide for us free. . . . For about a year now we say there's going to come a point where they say, 'Well this,' you know [isn't free]. I said, 'I'll be glad to pay it.'

NL: Maybe it's the kind of thing where they get you involved and then start charging.

Al: I really don't—that's an interesting point. I don't know the answer. But because almost everything these days has moved into advertising.

Returning to the subject of the meaning of Al's computer for him, I asked,

NL: If somebody took away your computer and said you can't use your computer anymore, what would that be like?

Al: I just had it! I had it for five days. I was, was, was total wreck. Primarily because I was having so much difficulty getting it redone.

NL: Through India, yeah.

Al: But so, well with our kids—If I have something I'll send to them [snaps his fingers], immediate. It's so nice . . . Quick e-mail is number one, I think, for older people particularly. Well all the way.

NL: All the way around.

Al: All the way around because—. Well, these kids, they text message all the time.

Al recounted how when he was a high school teacher he observed that keeping in touch by phone was important for his students, especially for the girls.

Al: . . . Communication is big with kids, huge. . . . But for older people, I think it's the ease with which you can communicate quickly and have them get something and respond quickly. . . . So I think the big thing with older people is e-mail.

NL: In that case, why are only a third of the people here involved with computing?

Al: One: a certain percentage are afraid of it—afraid that they can't do it. It's gonna' be a reflection on their intellect. And others, I've heard say, 'Well, if I want to talk to my daughter, I will pick up the phone.' And there are other interests out here. People play Bridge. . . . And someone says, 'Well I don't like to play Bridge unless I see the person.' So this is not just here. You must remember here is more representative of the types of people who are more apt to use it.

NL: Because?

Al: They are more financially advantaged.

Dottie: Independent.

Al: You have in general your better educational background. . . . You . . . ask almost anybody here. I am willing to bet that more than half of the women have gone to college and three quarters of the men have graduated . . . This is a select group . . .

Ever since I'd known Al, he had expressed a fondness for the card game of Bridge and early on started playing it online. Like other men in the Park, he was also an enthusiastic user of the game, flight simulator, and I asked him if he still played it.

Flight simulator—very interesting. Haven't done it for several years. But our son-in-law is so deep into it. He's flying every great big transport plane in the world. If you really get into it. . . . they have like a club around the world and they actually act as controllers at airports.

We continued to talk about his computer uses.

Al: I don't really use the Internet that much. I do very special stuff.

NL: You do the TED [lecture series on: Technology, Entertainment, Design]. What else are you doing?

Al: Music. . . . I can show you.

NL: So, you're legal? [Several years ago when Al was a Napster devotee and his son-in-law, a minister and amateur author, scolded him for using it. He reportedly told Al that he was depriving artists of royalties and that copyright infringement was involved.]

Al: Oh, yeah, it's perfectly legal. There are two of my little setups. When we're through here we can go in and look at it. I'll show you. It's easier to show you than it is—.

NL: So those are your two main things?

Al: Well, I'm experimenting and looking around on the Internet for things. But actually, finance. . . . AOL has the best finance section free of charge. And I've got 'em all. . . . First of all, you can put your portfolio on it. And daily it'll give you downloads in each one of those slots you have. Besides that you can research. You can go in there and put AT&T symbol there and you get all the information you want on AT&T—earnings, go back and get charts, back by the month, by the year—It's really wonderful and it's for anybody that wants to look at their stocks a little or see what they might want to buy. It's excellent . . .

NL: You all have been promoting AOL since I've been coming to the Computer Club in 1996 and you've never had another e-mail server? Have you ever tried Hotmail, G-mail, Outlook Express—

Al: I have tried Yahoo. I had MSN for a little while . . . Well, I mean since I am so satisfied with what I have—unless somebody tells me something about some other server that is something that I really want or can't get—

Still interested in learning Al's assessment of the value of his computer, I posed the question again.

NL: So, if you were deprived of the computer forever, what would become of you?

Al: Oh, I would find something to do. But it would not be as satisfactory to me as the computer. I'd say I'd probably do more reading. Maybe I'd look at more TV. My TV is PBS, Discovery Channel—these are wonderful programs.

NL: So I am going to dig at this. What does it do for you? Is it like a gadget, like an engineer guy gadget or a mental challenge or—

Al: Mental challenge is one. It is interesting to be able—I think we talked about this the other night—be able to go into some new website and evaluate it and see what it can do. . . . I'll show you all the stuff that I have referenced. I may want to go back and look at it again. . . .

NL: You look forward to [using it] everyday?

Al: Every day. First thing I do in the morning is check to see if I have any e-mail. If I have something special I want to do, I'll do it. . . . I'm not on it all the time, mind you, but I'm on several hours of the day.

In Al's Study. Since all conversational avenues seemed to lead to Al's computer, I suggested that we go to it so he could show me the activities he had been describing. Al agreed and as he arose he said to Dottie, "Will you excuse me Madame?" He repeated this question to her and we then walked down the short hall to their spare room, which served as Al's study. There were remnants of his previous computer piled on the floor. I sat beside him at his computer as he looked through his various programs and applications in order to show me the current activities that he had described in our earlier conversations. [I described and/or read some of what's on the computer screen and recorded my narration of some of his actions.]

NL: You have an updated computer. I don't remember this flat screen by Dell.

Al: Well, it's a flat screen and there's [on the floor] the screen that went bad on me. You can't just throw those away, you know. Not supposed to, anything electronic. You're supposed to go to a regular disposal. So I gotta' get them to take this away.

Al: This is Windows Media and what I've done is I've taken all these individual songs that I've got and made a play list. Now this is Burl Ives, see.

NL: You really are wild about music. You have always talked about music.

Al: Well, I'm the one who can't do anything but love it. Now, essentially, I put 'em all—install them in Windows Media. And I put them in their libraries, see. And I've made play lists. Now this is Burl Ives. Now here are the three songs from *Chicago*. Now here is Cole Porter.

Al wanted to show me how easily he could acquire favorite films on his computer. As he worked his way through various programs Al grew impatient when he couldn't get quickly to the site he wanted.

Al: But let me open Netflix. I want to show you Netflix.

NL: You've got a lot of icons. This is AOL. The look of it has changed quite a bit. Ok so we're going through AOL and we're getting to Netflix: 'rent as many movies as you--; unlimited DVDs---; fast, unlimited streaming to your PC—'

NL: How much a year to belong?

Al: This one costs us \$13.95 a month. OK, I'll try this. I haven't tried this since I've had it [i.e. his computer] reformatted and some of these things are set up a little differently.

Keeping the pace swift, as was his wont, Al started to move on to a demonstration of Skype but then got pulled back into his world of old music tunes. He told me that he liked to listen to old favorites while he did other tasks such as a limited amount of word processing.

Al: Here's the one I said we can get music. This isn't for download.

NL: And you do this from this guy's homepage.

Al: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I don't have to do anything. All right, these are downloadable, we can download these, see, if you want to.

NL: 'Al Jolson, Paul Whiteman, Judy Garland, Les Paul and Mary Ford—'

Al: Yeah, let's get Jimmy Durante and see what they have here. 'Free downloads,' see. You can download some of these.

NL: The ad says, 'continuous playing on your computer.' [Al plays, Durante's song that begins, 'You Must Remember This.'] And look what you get on the screen—a kaleidoscope of colors and designs. That's interesting.

Al: You want to know what I do at night. . . .—listen to old music. And . . . download this now and look at it whenever I want, you know. . . .

NL: I see that icon there; you have about two-dozen icons on your screen.

Al: All right, now here is my daughter. . . . And her son. This is a test call. You want to see if everything is working right. . . . Now this is what I've been trying to get a lot of the people in the Park to do. So rather than just sending an e-mail, get a camera, pick a Logitech. All right. Now record a video . . . [Al says for the camera/video:] 'Well I just wanted to show you Norma that this is one of the things I do.' Of course I can put more light on myself if I want to. . . . But with the light coming in from the side there, there's plenty of light. 'So, are you enjoying your visit out here, Norma?' [I reply, 'I am Al.'] 'And are you getting all the information you need for your doctorate?' ['I am Al.'] 'Are you going to give me credit?' ['Yes I am Al.'] 'That's nice of you Norma. Stop.'

NL: So this is Quick Cam software that goes with it. OK, it's Logitech quick cam.

Al: Yes, it comes right with it. All right, so let me show you what you do. . . .

NL: You're trying to get other people in the park to do this but, my gosh, that's a steep learning curve.

Al: It isn't, it isn't.

NL: No, It isn't for you but—

Al: Well I mean any thing using a computer is a learning curve. But this isn't hard. [a voice says, 'file's done'] Because all you have to do—the first part is simple. I told you making a video—you saw, I just 'click click click.' And then it goes in 'my documents.' And once you have anything in your documents you can do anything you want with it.

After Al walked me once again through the process of videoing for a Skype conversation, I shared an observation with him.

NL: You are a true engineer just like my Dad and all the other engineers I've known. This gadgetry, this challenge, this is what you live for. And you just want to find new things to explore.

Al: Yes, and many times, like I told you the other day, it's the satisfaction of knowing how to do it, the challenge. And many times maybe I'm not interested.

Suddenly, we were looking at some early photographs on Al's computer that he had apparently scanned and downloaded.

Al: This used to be my—this is part of my HAM gear. I used to—wait this was the early one. I had a lot more later on. . . .

NL: What was the excitement of—because you HAM operators really love it.

Al: Well, the biggest part that I liked was later on when I worked with the Navy. I think I told you, running phone patches. That was really interesting.

NL: Connecting them. Well again, it's all about communication and connection. Connection around the world, which at that time was so much more exotic.

We left Al's past as he turned his attention to his third major computer use, checking his stock portfolio.

Al: Let me just show you this for a minute. Let's say I'm interested in the telephone company. 'T,' I search here. That's their symbol, AT&T. That gives me all kinds of information. I can get a chart [on] what they've done over a period of time. And I do this and this is how much it's up today. Pretty good for AT&T. It must be a good day. This is the chart. Now this is, let's say I want to do it for two years. Look at that. Think about the information you get *that quickly* and everything. [We look at a few more stock prices. He uses the 'symbol lookup' option when he doesn't know it from memory. Then he looks at the chart of each stock.] . . . You see what I'm telling you about you can get information? *How fast?* At no charge? You want to find out how many insiders are buying? News analysis? Press releases? Key executives? . . . Earnings analysis, estimates by a bunch of different people. You can just get all kinds of information!

NL: Do you do this every day?

Al: No! [chuckles] I don't work the market that much. . . . But if I want to get something I can get it. No problem.

The last item Al had to show me was one that we had discussed several years earlier.

Al: Now, what else did we—We missed something, you were asking. Oh, instant message, just a minute. [Al returned to the instant messaging place in AOL.] . . . And if I wanted to send an instant message to him, see—

NL: First of all you have to find out if he's online, don't you?

Al: You get this in 'my buddy' list, see. And this is our granddaughter down in the—she's not on, I don't think. Well anyway these are the others I have. But if you want to talk to them or send them this you highlight it and then you send it, 'send an instant message'—see it down there? Then you can send it to them *right now*.

NL: But how does this differ from e-mail?

Al: Only in the sense that you do it immediately. He's there now. He says that he receives it right now. And he can answer you right now.

In the interest of time, Al did not respond any further to his son and signed off. Then, in a 'déjà vu all over again' exchange, Al and I revisited the issue of the technology infrastructure in the Park. It was possible that the administrators had heeded his previous advice since the new apartment building was in fact wired for DSL connections within each unit. The Park, however, had not yet become a "wireless" community.

Al: Now we're *supposed* to get wireless in the Park. . . . They have it over there in Highview Place.

NL: It's not high priority [for the rest of the Park].

Al: Well they pay for it. See you gotta' be careful on all these deals. When you sign to go to Highview Place you pay so much per month. Part of what you're paying is the cost of having Wi-Fi . . . whether or not you use it, see. Lakeview Place—they have it wired in but they haven't connected it.

NL: George Brinkley also said that Seawell Place was putting in some new sprinkler systems and somebody said, 'Well why don't you do the wiring now?' and they didn't, for some reason.

Al: This is interesting. When they were going to build Highview Place, I sent an e-mail to our executive president. I said, 'Look, when you're building it you might as well wire the place up.' He came back and says, 'Well that'd be too expensive.' I don't know if he understood what I was saying because they did wire it. Which was logical. I mean in this day and age if you're building a new building it doesn't cost you that much more. You're stringing lights for this that and everything else, let's string another one in and put it in the wall.

NL: Furthermore, if they want to attract people—

Al: *This* is exactly what I said! . . . 'Look,' I said, 'in this day and age you have got to be up to date. You have got to have this available for people who have that service now and they won't go someplace unless it's available.' [Al slapped one hand into another to emphasize his words.]

In addition to computing matters, Al and I spoke briefly towards the end of our visit together about some of the Park's residential statistics.

NL: I have heard that the Highview Place average age is lower than the rest of the Park.

Al: I know that their average income is higher.

NL: Because it costs more. What do you think is the average number of years of people's tenure here?

Al: That's a good question because I don't know. But some place way back I read a statistic which may or may not be correct—. If you stay here ten years, you're ahead of the game. By that I mean we put down some a hundred and some thousand [dollars]. So if you distribute that over ten years and at that point if you get put in the hospital here and have to be taken care of, you're ahead of the game. People who lose . . . put in the money and they come here and die [the] next week—. But it's an insurance policy. That's what you're buying, see.

While we explored his computer contents, I mentioned to Al that I hadn't been receiving nearly as many e-mails from him as I used to. In the early days of the Computer Club, he had assumed the role of chronicler, information sharer, and story/joke teller. His postings were voluminous and famous among Club members. Since Al had reduced his role in the Club, he had also gradually pared down the "Swen" List and his postings to it. He told me, however, that he would put me back on the current List and I would be sure to get all of the e-mails. After about an hour of talking with me Al appeared to be tiring. As I said goodbye I told him I would look forward to receiving his informative mail once again.

**Epilogue:** When I was with him in October 2008, Al told me he had not heard of social networks, such as MySpace and Facebook. I was about to conclude (as I had theorized) that none of the participants in my research study used or were familiar with social networking sites. However, I would have also theorized that if anyone I knew in the Park would be inclined to explore such sites, it would have been Al Swenson. I should not, therefore, have been surprised that in January, two months after we spoke, I received an e-mail from Facebook inviting me to be Albert Swenson's friend. That prompted the following exchange of information between us in early 2009.

Jan. 1: I sent an e-mail to Al and expressed my surprise at finding an invitation to be his friend on Facebook. I asked him when/why/how he came to join.

Jan. 2: We exchanged four e-mails in which he told me the story: 'Just started Facebook a few days ago at the request of my son and daughter. Do not know it well—just learning. I have two granddaughters and a grandson on it. The only basic thing I am learning is that they post a lot of pictures on Facebook so I can see more of them and my great granddaughters.' I asked Al how he came to invite me to be his friend and if he knew of anyone else in the Park on Facebook. He answered, 'I took a chance and used your name to make friends.' He added that he knew of no one else in the Park on Facebook.

Jan. 4: I wrote on Al's Facebook 'wall': 'Hi Al, We begin another adventure in computer land.' Two hours later, close to midnight, Al wrote on my wall: 'Hi Norma. Still a novice on this, but will learn the tricks of the trade.'

Jan. 14: I wrote on Al's Facebook wall: 'Hi Al! Figured this thing out yet? I'm counting on your love of tinkering to help me sort it out 'cause it's driving me crazy. I like the group photo of your family. Where'd you get the backdrop?' [Receiving no reply from Al through his Facebook account, I contacted him by e-mail.]

Feb. 16: Al and I exchanged several e-mails.

To Al: 'You like me are not very active on Facebook, eh? I can't seem to warm up to it. How about you?'

From Al: 'Also can not get warmed up to Facebook.'

To Al: 'What is it about Facebook that fails to draw you in? Is it really a generation thing, do you think? I'd really like your opinion/assessment.'



From Al: 'Not taken to Facebook because am just not interested in continually communicating with everybody. Prefer using the e-mail since I can better control the communication. Also, to a degree think it is an age environment. Those younger than we senior citizens seem to spend more time using the computer for corresponding; apparently cell phones are not enough. If you could see them at their computers they probably are multi-tasking with both the computer and cell phone being used at the same time.'

Feb. 19: I sent Al an e-mail thanking him for his thoughts and expressing similar ones. He did not reply. He did not post anything to me on Facebook. In fact, his last Facebook post appears to be January 17<sup>th</sup>.

Feb. 27: Al sent two e-mails. The first was to his Swen List and it was a lengthy and detailed description of Netflix and how to use the service with one's computer.

The second e-mail was directed only to me and it was a vintage Swen post. The subject was Kindle 2: All you librarians had better start training for a new job. I just listened to a Charlie Rose show that had Jeff Bezos, the CEO founder of Amazon on. He demonstrated the new Kindle2, which I am sure you have heard of, and stated that he hopes someday to have every book in any language available to be brought up in 60 seconds on the Kindle. One then would never have to go to a library to spend maybe many minutes or hours finding if they have it. McDonald is hiring.

March 2: Al sent a fairly lengthy e-mail to the Swen List on the subject of 'DSL Broadband.' It laid out the options, from selecting a provider to the final connections at home. In the middle of this mail, Al advised, 'The one big advantage to having any broadband program is that you can also set up AOL free of charge. AOL, I believe, has the best and easiest e-mail to run; you can run the Internet from there as well, but of course you are limited to the speed of your broadband program.'

In the first week of March, Al Swenson suffered a stroke and was hospitalized. He died the following week, at the age of 92. On that day in March Al's grandson posted this to Al's Facebook page,

Please know that at 1:55 EST on [date], Al Swenson passed away . . . after suffering a stroke last week. We are in the process of determining funeral arrangements, but wanted his friend base to know this news. We will all miss him greatly.

Al's membership on Facebook was an indication of his willingness to explore technological innovations as he was made aware of them. It evidenced his strong desire to keep abreast of new trends, to remain a participant in the world that surrounded him. However lukewarm he might have felt about Facebook, Al would, I believe, have appreciated the 'now-ness' of having his death announced in that popular, online space.

**Coda:** Within six months of Al's death, his wife, Dottie, died in the Nursing Care Center.

**Insights:** By 2008, Al had, temporarily at least, finally joined the League of Computer Out of the Window Throwers, voicing the level of frustration which, while common to other Park technology explorers, was a novel sentiment for Al. His major source of ire and dismay was the inadequate information he received from the Dell help desk staff in India. He had to go through multiple levels of staff ranks to find even a modicum of understanding, both at the linguistic and technological levels. There was one curiosity during his prolonged description of

his travails that escaped my critical attention, and that was Al's mention of using the XP operating system, an upgrade he had strenuously refused to make for several years. And, by 2008, his former dread of having to upgrade to XP had been replaced by his dread of the prospect of being forced to upgrade to VISTA, (then the most recent OS for PCs) when his computer monitor died. A major cause of Al's distress in getting his computer reformatted was that it took the better part of a week. That was a very long time frame in Al's thinking since he liked immediacy. He snapped his fingers while talking to emphasize speed of response which is what he wanted while computing. He reiterated this again and again: "instant time, respond quickly, instant message, do it immediately, communicate quickly, *right now!*" It was as if he was driven by the rush of time passing.

During this visit, Al mentioned more uses for and more hours logged onto his computer than three years earlier and the uses he cited were the interests that he had been pursuing throughout the previous decade. But some of them, such as his downloading of music, had been rejuvenated through the advent of new archiving tools for his vast collection. Also, although he didn't use it, Al was excited about the availability of Netflix movies online. Not surprisingly, it was another tool of communication that truly energized Al—Skype. It was one more extension of his HAM/radio patching experiences and he eagerly explored all of its capabilities, once again chatting globally but this time with Skype pals he could see. And Al was looking forward to more Skype enabled activities such as playing Bridge online with visible players. Ironically, Al could have been using Skype in 2005 were it not for the fact that his use would have been constrained by the relative lack of other Skype subscribers with whom to connect. All in all, Al's reinvigorated computer use reinforced what he had said about the lure of computing for him being the excitement of new discoveries. I couldn't have known it at the time, but in 2005 Al was by no means done with his computer; he just hadn't yet found the next Big Thing.

Three years earlier, in 2005, Al came out of his study and joined his wife in front of the TiVo. At that time, he seemed to be in a 'been there/done that' frame of mind with regard to his computer use. Three years later, in 2008, he was back in his study, having discovered both the wonders of Skype and the ability to make videos to send to his family through the Internet. (Eventually on Al's Facebook page, there were two such videos showing him and Dottie looking into the computer/camera and sending birthday wishes to their grandchildren. Al said a paragraph worth of words and at the end Dottie chimed in with her "Happy Birthday.") So

although Dottie was once again often alone in her wheel chair in front of the television, she occasionally penetrated Al's room to make the videos, the only way she could appear in them. Previously, Dottie had participated in the family e-mail by reading the printouts of it in her space (i.e. the living room)—a practical solution for her immobility. Although she entered into Al's world a little more frequently, she still had to be “pulled” there by her husband. Al's desire for the comfort of his space (i.e. his study) was revealed in his comment that one of the uses of his computer was to get him out of her room.

His attempt at humor when Al said that his computer allowed him to escape his wife and her room barely disguised the heavy toll that caring for a disabled person was taking on him. He was slightly stooped over and so much thinner than three years earlier that I had to enlist the help of the Dining Hall hostess to identify him at our dinner appointment. The several people to whom I mentioned this, attributed his decline to caring for his wife. For years, Park residents had been commenting on his devotion to her and care of her but they were noticing the cost. His dilemma was revealed in his half-hearted joking—he loved her but resented her condition. Their situation was a manifestation of the remark that their good friend, Winnie Mahler, made about the inadvisability of the “old caring for the old.” In retrospect, there were portents of Al's failing health. While in his study, Al and I had a little ‘back and forth’ about a minor matter involving computer cameras. He was confused about what constituted the Internet. I was aware of an uncharacteristic impatience and abruptness in some of his responses. He was displeased when interrupted by a question or faced with a fact that he had not originated. This new irritability stopped me, for example, from questioning his assertion that he had used Vonage “twelve years ago” (it was launched in about 2001). In previous years we could have had engaged in jocular debate over such a mis-statement. As we talked on that day his speech became faster and more fragmented and he was slurring some of his words. He was evidencing word reversals and recall difficulty. He tried, for example, five versions of the name of one of the residence buildings in the Park settling on the correct one only after I said it. I speculated on possible causes, such as, excitement and racing thoughts, fear of misplacing through the distraction of my comments, and/or the fatigue he reportedly had been experiencing due to loss of sleep over his wife's care. Several months thereafter, I realized that he was evidencing signs of the cognitive malfunctioning that culminated just eighteen weeks later in a stroke.

Al had explained to me the numerical calculations by which Park residents could consider themselves well served if they managed to survive for at least ten years after buying into this Continuing Care Residence Community. By 2009, when Al died, he had been living in the Park for a little over ten years so he died “ahead of the game.” As an inveterate Bridge player, he would have appreciated that fact.

**General Discussion.** In 1999, Al Swenson spoke five words, which though not compelling at the time, revealed a major component of his life story. They were “first of all, *I’m an amateur radio operator.*” It took me several years of hearing Al repeat this story for me to realize the primacy of that identity and the experiences that formed it. What those words were signaling was this idea. “First and foremost in my life has been an experience that I had as a very young man and it continues to be the most formative period I can recall.” Al spoke fondly and often of his HAM patching experiences in which he connected people who were forced (by their military duties) to live apart. His acts of connecting soldiers and families in the 1940s culminated, in his last years, in his connection with a global audience of Skypers. But there was more to this version of Voice Over Internet Protocol than conversation. There was something about the inclusion of visual images via web cameras that contributed to the sense of the *presence* that Al felt so keenly. Al, himself, recognized that his HAM radio knowledge was a “platform” from which he could investigate “any new” communication means. This was not true of everyone, however. At least two other Park residents and Computer Club members, Will Mahler and Mervin Cooper, mentioned their HAM radio experiences during our conversations about computers. As the years went by, however, I witnessed the waning computer interest of these two men. In fact, Mervin Cooper had transported his HAM equipment to his Park cottage and eventually focused his interest solely on it. By contrast, until the end of his life, Al’s interest in *both* technologies remained high.

Al was an explorer. Whether born or made, this trait was at the heart of Al’s desire to embrace new technologies. Each time I met with him over the years, Al was enthused about some new technological development that he discovered in its early forms: Internet; online games (both against a computer program and actual partners); search engines and eventually Google; Napster, Grokster and the subsequent forms of music transmission; online movies and videos and most recently Skype. A motivating force behind his computing was finding the means to maintain interests in common with his children and grandchildren. He influenced them to

pursue some of his interests (Bridge and Flight Simulator, for example) and they persuaded him to try to engage in social networking. It is telling that it is equally likely that either Al or his children instigated his use of Skype (though I do not know the fact of the matter). Remarkably, he was willing to embrace change and innovation even while remaining devoted to the past, as exemplified in film and music. Al loved old movies and music, especially from the era of the 1940s and 50s. He was using his computer to recapture the golden days of yore, to go back in time. Even if he had bothered to transport to his downsized residence his vinyl LPs and a player on which to hear them, it was so much easier and faster to capture them from an online source (since he knew how). And, he could share them with all his friends by sending them online which he did on a daily basis. He could (had he cared to add memory to his computer) watch the old movies he enjoyed, saving him a trip to the NetFlix pick up site, a rental store or library. Almost as good, he could order films online to be sent to him. In a remarkable way, Al learned the advancing technology while still cognitively able and subsequently used it to assist his return trip through his life's course and down the lanes of memory. All things considered, Al Swenson was a good example (as Laslo Unterweg was of the negative side of the equation) of the "rich get richer" model of Internet use reported by Kraut and his fellow researchers in their revisiting of the issue. They stated,

Having more social resources amplified the benefits that people got from using the Internet . . . Among extraverts, using the Internet was associated with increases in community involvement and self-esteem and declines in loneliness. . . . ; it was the reverse for introverts.... Those who are already effective in using social resources in the world are likely to be well positioned to take advantage of a powerful new technology like the Internet. (Kraut et al. 2002, 67; 69)

Throughout his years in the Park, Al maintained an emotional attachment to and an interest in the Computer Club. He was disappointed in what had become of it. The second generation of the Park Computer Club (starting in about 2004-05) had a very different "flavor" to it than in its earlier years. At the Club's inception in 1995-96, Al brought his engineering background and exploratory enthusiasm for the Internet to the Club, and the founder, Donald McDonald, brought his DOS expertise and cheerleading/salesman background. Between the two of them and several other jocular members like Nelson Jones, there was a lot of laughter at meetings. Al referred to it in 1999 as the Comedy Club. The predominant co-leader of the second generation of the Club, George Brinkley, had a computer science background and was hardly a 'gee whiz' advocate of computing. With a quiet manner, George focused on specific, complex and current developments in computing technologies, relying on the higher level of knowledge

and computer comfort of the younger members. Very few of the original Club members were attending meetings with any regularity in 2008. According to Al, this new version of the Club was no longer the vital force it once had been. This was an understandable feeling since his emotional and temporal involvement in it was much reduced even though he continued to offer his services to it. For at least twelve years Al promoted the use of AOL to the Computer Club members. His dedication to this mail program became a matter of good-natured humor among some of them as they discovered that there were other options. I occasionally teased him about it as well. It is fitting, however, that (what appeared to be) Al's last post to his Swen List included a final endorsement of that company to which he remained so loyal. When Al died, George Brinkley solicited and received written tributes from Club members which acknowledged Al's significant contributions to it.

Al repeated his belief that the residents of Flamingo Park were above average in intelligence—or at least formal education—in income and in lifestyle. And again he cited these reasons as predisposing them to the use of I-C technologies. He could only speculate as to why the computer owners or users in the Park were a minority of the overall population. Some were fearful of exposing incompetent intellects, some wanted to hear the voices of family members and still others wanted to see the faces of their Bridge partners. Al had certainly done his part to encourage the use of technology among his fellow residents. He remained in contact with the Computer Club, trying in his last months to set up Skype demonstrations for its members and describing it in his Swen List posts. And, I know from speaking with some of our mutual Park friends that he was promoting its use on a one-by-one, in-person basis as well. That was vintage Al Swenson—teaching and sharing and exploring new technologies.

**PART III: CONCLUSION**  
**CHAPTER 9**  
**CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

**A. Finding the Questions and Answers**

My research began with a focus on information and how computing technology could assist the process of obtaining and using information. Thus, my attention was on the *content* of the computing—on the *what*. The tandem question that arose was about purpose and motivation—the *why*. There are many ways and media through which to obtain information. Why turn to a computer for doing so? Why tackle a complex and unknown technology? The what and why questions seem inextricably linked when the object of attention is *information*. In retrospect I can see that the answers I was receiving in the initial stages of my study exposed the flaw in my starting concept. It took me some years to discover that information was not the only, or necessarily the most relevant, issue with regard to computing technology. Consider the conundrum of the novice user in the mid-1990s (when browsers—initially, “Mosaic”—were in their incipient, slow and less robust stages) as expressed by this exchange in one of my interviews,

Q: “What information do you hope to find with your computer?”

A: “I don’t know, I don’t know what’s on there. And I don’t know how to get there.”

Gradually, the third, related question began to move to the foreground of my thinking—the *how*. How were beginning computer users going to discover what computers had in the way of information or applications that were useful for them? How were they going to learn of *any* benefits it might have? And it is this *how* question that is especially significant for the oldest of our citizens. Once any young computing aspirant answers the *what* and *why* questions, the *how* does not seem particularly puzzling. They are in school, they take courses, they imitate their friends and peers, they “look over the shoulders” (Twidale 2006) of their colleagues, they ask their local help desks. Now, in 2009, there are barely any what or why question needed for those currently being educated or working in professional, skilled and even semi-skilled jobs. For Senior citizens, many of whom are retirees, a portion of whom are living in age-limited communities, the resources for major task learning may not be well integrated into their environments. In the beginning years of my study (mid to late 1990s) there were burgeoning

opportunities for Senior retirees to be schooled in new communication technologies, but nothing comprehensive. Even though the *how* questions proved to be more pressing in the lives of the older adults with whom I worked at computing, the *what* and *why* questions remained important. Indeed, the combined *what* and *how* emerged in my discovery that the answer to *what information* was most needed by many of the Flamingo Park residents was *how to use their computers*. It was in the pursuit of this *how* that the I-C technologies fulfilled their promise of increased sociability.

The answers to the more formally conceived research questions of (1) what function do computers serve in the lives of older adults; (2) does computer use foster or interfere with social ties; and (3) is social support necessary for success in the face of challenging learning tasks were as follows:

1. Computers were valued as a symbol of competence and intelligence. Some individuals brought their computers with them when transferred to the single-room residences of the assisted living or nursing care facilities. Even when use had ceased, their computers were displayed to signal that their owners were or had once been keeping up to date.
2. Computer owners socialized *around* computing use (with in-person family members or friends) more than, or as much as, they socialized *through* their computers in the digital realm of the Internet.
3. While the existence of social support did facilitate computer exploration, more important was the social support network generated and developed among fellow computer users.

### **B. A Longitudinal View on Life-Long Development**

I initially posed the question, what role does I-C technology play in the lives of older adults in America? An important underlying question was what could a long-term study contribute to the answer of this question? I have attempted to address these two issues through a detailed portrayal of five individuals engaged in the exploration of computing. I have shown the depth and breadth of the impact of this technology on their lives, including the lives of those with whom they lived and closely associated. The insights I discussed for each of these profiled individuals address many of the ancillary issues posed in conjunction with the first question—the starting, connecting, encountering roadblocks, getting help, finding motivation and sustaining interest. Below, I will highlight several of these issues such as the roadblocks encountered by Park residents in their technological journey and the support they found along the way.



First, I wish to address the merits of a long-term study such as mine. Gerontological research of the last two to three decades has focused on the notion of a life-long development for human beings. Twenty years ago, several British sociologists contrasted the views on “old age” held by social gerontologists in Britain and America, as, respectively, “miserable” and “jolly” (Fennell, Phillipson and Evers 1988, 8-9). Although jolly might have been an overly optimistic reading of the field of American gerontology, these authors wished to point out that the British view was evolving towards the idea of old age as a period of “opportunity” (8) and that a reconceptualizing of age was taking place beyond their shores as well. A noteworthy example of the rethinking occurring among American researchers of that time period is the Life Span Theory. This theory, which continues to be influential in contemporary research on aging, posits that development continues throughout the life cycle. “That gain or growth as well as loss or decline can be observed throughout the life course has provided a general framework for researchers to explore some of the positive attributes of aging” (Hoyer and Rybash 1996, 67). Some tenets of this theory are that “aging is a life-long process; . . . no one age or period of life is any more important than any other age or period . . . [and that] there is plasticity and resiliency in function throughout the life span” (67). In the Life Span theory there are two particularly salient concepts that have important implications for my research population—that of “resiliency and reserve capacity.”

Resiliency . . . refers to a capacity for successful adaptation and recovery in response to stressful life events. Reserve capacity refers to the individual’s resources for responding effectively to challenging situations. [S]ome researchers have suggested that there is a diminished reserve capacity at the end of one’s life span and that the individual is vulnerable to a variety of circumstances associated with mortality. However, studies of reserve capacity and resiliency do not address how development can be enhanced in situations where there is *optimal support* [emphasis added]. (68)

Referring to a “demographic imperative,” Field and Gueldner (2001) noted that “‘the oldest-old’ generally defined as those age 85 and older, are the fastest growing age group in the United States” (21). And—good news!—there is evidence that many of these older adults will not necessarily experience significant cognitive decline. Reporting on a long-term (fifty-four years) longitudinal study, they concluded that “the majority of older adults were found to retain their intellectual abilities into their 80s and 90s” (24). One important ramification of this fact is that care-taking agents must closely examine all possible causes (medication, sensory deficits, stress, etc.) of behavior that might hastily be labeled as dementia. These authors further advise,

If individuals are continually treated as if they are demented, they will act demented—even worse, they may come to believe it themselves. When their competence is acknowledged, they are likely to exercise it.

Members of this age group must be seen as individuals with healthy potential, even when they exhibit considerable disability. Social agencies should be vigilant in their search for environmental adaptations that could provide elderly individuals with assistance in maintaining *contact with friends* [emphasis added]. (24-26)

These notions of lifelong development and the persistence of intellectual ability into late adulthood provide a compelling rationale for the longitudinal examination of the continual learning challenges faced throughout our lifetimes. Individuals wax and wane in their interests and pursuits, and in order to appreciate these changes and the factors which influence them, patience and re-viewing are required. Al Swenson's apparent lessening of interest in computing in 2005 changed dramatically in succeeding years, and I found his interest to be invigorated in 2008 as a result of new technological developments like Skype. In 2008, Will Mahler hadn't used his computer in a year but vowed that he had not given up on an eventual return to it. Based on my observation of Al's experience, I was loathe to contradict Will's view (even though there was evidence for a negative prediction on the matter). Thus, evolution or devolution of use cannot be hastily concluded, underscoring the fact that in actuality, 'research is never done.' Another advantage of a long-term view is that, with time, a consistent core of concerns emerges for each individual. Thus, it was only after repeated interviews with Laslo that I fully appreciated his persistent frustration over lost time. Similarly, I finally and truly heard the mantras of Neva Evans and Al Swenson's love of connecting people. It was through long years of association with Barbara Howard that I could comprehend the profound nature of her determination to fully embrace life and all its challenges—her ever readiness for whatever came her way.

### **C. Challenging Roadblocks In the Path of I-C Technology Use**

#### *1. Ill-Defined Purpose for Computer*

Al Swenson told me in our first interview that people his age should not acquire a computer until or unless they had a clearly defined purpose in mind for its use. I have come to see the wisdom in his thinking. The absence of a clear vision of use or of an informed understanding of the function of computers was one reason for the self-described failure in the computing efforts of five or six members of my research population, including Laslo, Helmut Rossler and Myrtle Likert. None of them had had previous experience with these devices and were mainly motivated by curiosity stimulated by mass media. Although Neva, too, was moved by curiosity, hers was primed by the demonstration of her grandson's Apple computer—a more

personal connection. Furthermore, she had a strong system of defense against potential failure, unlike Laslo and Helmut who believed that they should, by virtue of previous career choices, be able to master this newer technology. Barbara, like several women in this study, used her computer initially and continually as a glorified typewriter although the ‘glory’ part of that concept faded as word processing programs increased in complexity. Samuel Dunlop’s purpose was to use the computer as either another of his creative pursuits or in the service of already established ones. Al, himself, one of the most accomplished computer users in the Park, had many visions of how this technology could improve his life. But his computer explorations had a deeper, underlying motivation, and that was his strong desire to teach others; it was in order to satisfy this drive that he continued searching for new computer applications. Everyone whom I met used their computers—on however limited a basis—for electronic communication, but for a fair number of owners, e-mail was more a novelty than a robust means of staying connected with significant people in their lives. In no small measure, this was a result of poor online connections, but there were a variety of other reasons such as distaste for typing, distrust of the safety of the “WWW,” the desire to hear the voices of their family members, their lack of understanding of how to use the mail programs and so on. Except for Al, few people used the Internet with any regularity during the beginning years of my study, nor did they have a clear concept of how it might be of use to them.

## *2. Lack of Support*

There were several individuals who were unable to marshal any useful support for their computing efforts. Primary reasons for this were inadequate social skills within the Park context, a lack of close or any family ties, or the inability to make use of the resources at hand (such as the Computer Club) due to either cognitive or physical limitations. Unfortunately, Laslo suffered from all of these conditions. His deteriorating vision and hearing prevented him from attending Computer Club meetings, he was estranged from his one close relative and his personality was completely out of synch with the typical Park resident. By nature, he was a loner and disinclined to ask for help from other Park computer users. Two other men in my study, Samuel and Nelson Jones were, like Laslo, severely hindered by poor vision and, in Nelson’s case, by poor hearing as well. However, the two of them had very close family ties in the form of nearby children or a (much younger, healthier) wife, and both men had outgoing personalities and positive worldviews. It was their family support that enabled their continued computer use,

however limited that might become. Myrtle Likert had never married and (as one of the longest of Park residents) had lived alone for many years after the death of her mother. Although her hearing and vision, at age 97, were quite good, Myrtle started her computer explorations at the rather late age of 90 and had not been able to crack the computing code, so to speak. She was clearly beset by a weakened inhibitory control system, resulting in her inability to focus on one aspect of a computing task or screen at a time. She had outlived the few friends she once had in the Park and seemed unable to attract any others. Dr. Q, another study participant, lost most of his social support system when he was transferred to the Nursing Care Center as a result of his Parkinson's disease. Once his wife subsequently died, he was completely bereft of support since his fellow NCC residents were mostly beyond the ability to converse and certainly none of them shared his interest in the computer he brought with him to the NCC. His children did not live nearby nor visit often and I was the only visitor with whom he could converse about technology for any length of time. During my visits, he and I made a few trial runs on his computer and it was apparent to me that with patient guidance, he would have been able to use it, albeit in a different capacity than before. His would be the very circumstance in which an interventionist use of assistive technology—like a specially adapted PC—would be warranted and serve the dual purpose of abetting survival and thrival.

### *3. Inability to Learn the Language of Computing*

In my introduction I suggested that computing technology comprised a language—one that has not only a new vocabulary (technical jargon), but also (especially for the 'fluent' speaker of it) its own syntax, including many distinctive verbs. I also suggested that language acquisition becomes increasingly difficult as people age. Some scholars continue to find the theory of critical learning useful to explain this difficulty.

Childhood is the time for learning. Many cognitive and motor skills are gained quickly during childhood and are not mastered as easily if the learning process begins later. Developmental neurobiologists are keenly interested in this "window" of opportunity. . . . Recent work on the acquisition of language has underscored how profoundly early neuronal activity can influence the organization of the brain. . . . If a child learns a second language early in life, both the native and second language are represented in the same cortical region. In contrast, when a second language is acquired in adulthood, a new language center that is clearly separated from the native language center is established in the cortex. Although these findings do not yet explain why young children are able to learn a new language more easily than older individuals, they do support the findings that early experiences affect the way the brain develops. (Hockfield and Lombroso 1998, 992, 93)

Other research shows that language use, in general, is compromised in older adults due to inevitable cognitive changes. And language comprehension is likewise subject to the vagaries of aging.

In listening, when the pace is controlled by the speaker, older adults may have particular difficulty in understanding and retaining the information, especially as propositional density (ideas expressed per word) is increased or in noisy environments. (Stine-Morrow and Shake 2009, 339)

Age-related declines in sensory processes and cognitive capacity impact the ability to derive meaning from text and spoken language, especially as syntactic structure becomes more complex or speech rate is increased. Age-related declines also impact name retrieval and the syntactic complexity of production. (341)

Given the deterioration of first language use in the aging individual, it seems reasonable to assume that undertaking the learning of another language constitutes an enormous challenge. Clearly, most of the Park individuals with whom I spoke despaired of ever learning computerese at even a rudimentary level. Is the acquisition of the language an important component of using the technology effectively? With his references to “controlling discourses” and “mastering the language of technology,” Bruce suggests that it is. Although he was speaking in broad terms in regard to multiple kinds of literacy, this statement is applicable to the specific task of learning computerese.

Literacy is intimately bound up with language. We need to learn a language before we can become literate users of it and we use literacy as a way to learn other things through languages. (Bruce 1995, 10)

Samuel Dunlop stated that he could not retain the sense or words of the technology that was being addressed at the Computer Club, implying that that constituted a roadblock in his computer use and understanding. In the midst of trying to accomplish a computing task, Neva Evans was beset with terms that she recalled as a “flash thing” or a “flash plug in” and simply gave up on the task. If Barbara Howard misnamed her gift of a “flash drive” as a “flush bar,” did that make the difference in her understanding of its use? It might if she had tried an online search of that phrase. Recalling the new vocabulary words was not the only or even the heart of the matter for these computing aspirants. There were other important language learning components that were also missing like repeated practice even to the point of drilling, use in context, having skilled teachers and a strong drive to learn. These Flamingo Park residents were not, after all, in school six to eight hours a day.

#### *4. Hindering Help*

Not all proffered help was helpful. Novice computer users are, understandably, influenced by the opinions of their significant others, their friends, instructors and helpers. What are they to do when these various agents offer conflicting opinions and advice? Indeed, what are they to do in the face of the limited knowledge and skills of their informal tutors? Neva Evans' companion, Tally, was unafraid of the online world of commerce and enthusiastically conducted business via the Internet which included gambling, trading with collectors, and transactions on eBay. On the other hand, Neva's son-in-law ("a computer genius") vehemently opposed personal exposure in the realm of the Internet. And, when these two men created a "his and hers" desktop/computer environment on Neva's computer, she was often stymied in her use of it. Several of the male tutors (Sturgis in particular) had a 'my way or the highway' attitude and discouraged their acolytes from getting second opinions or sharing computing advice from others. The early leaders of the Computer Club, Don and Al, insisted that the members have the same kinds of services and equipment so that they could more easily trouble shoot for the members. That is to say, their individual needs were not met in the interest of facilitating *group* instruction. Thus, Club members who did not own PCs or subscribe to AOL were usually on their own. There was confusion in the wake of tutors who took command of the machines of others, often changing the appearance and/or functions of a user's machine. When troubleshooting remotely (as Sturgis did for Barbara), the user could be unclear as to how a problem was solved and thereby distanced from the process of computing. When proxies sent e-mail on behalf of an incapacitated user, the latter lost privacy and autonomy and, possibly, her/his virtual community. And for some categories of computer users in the Park, there was no reliable help at all; this was especially true for Apple/Mac users, who were regarded as another exotic specimen among the Park fauna.

#### *5. Computing Despite Technology*

Manufacturers of soft and hard ware act, no doubt, with the belief that their products aid in the process of using I-C technologies. However, their rapidly changing iterations foiled many of the Flamingo Park computer users who could not keep up with them and who resented being confronted with repeated learning curves. Changes in operating systems, interface designs, peripherals and levels of program complexity test the abilities of many computer users. But when

present *in conjunction* with the aging bodies and brains of older users, the demand is a formidable one.

#### *6. Loss of Former Help: The Old and New Computer Club*

The Computer Club was in its first years of existence in the 1990s a major source of support. But as the years went by and members gained experience, they wanted more from the Club than it could provide. But even in the beginning it did not serve as a training venue. After the initial meeting that attracted more than one hundred attendees, interest in the Club dropped off sharply and soon consisted of a core of thirty to fifty members—a miniscule percent of the total Park population of almost one thousand. The probable reason for this lack of attendance was because most people had hoped for hands-on instruction rather than Don Mc Donald's 'under the hood' exposition. At first, the Club didn't even have a computer on which to demonstrate functions. As Al pointed out, the Club was not a class; it was just a club; in fact a "comedy club." Many club attendees, however, tried to treat the Club as a class in the absence of other options. There was a core group that continued to meet for the socializing it provided even though their computer use was not thereby advanced. But, by 2004, co-leaders Al and Don had grown tired of trying to find new topics of interest and they turned the leadership over to a younger man, George Brinkley, just as the club was moved to a new building. That core group of old club members soon found that the cozy ambiance provided by Don's and Al's humor and jolliness was missing. In addition, a younger cohort of residents with a more advanced level of I-C technology use began attending the meetings. In response, the core members were once again left behind feeling that the topics were too advanced, so most of the participants in my study lost a part of their social network. (To gain a feeling for the new club's approach and interests, see the interview with George Brinkley in Appendix E.)

#### *7. Absence of Good Infrastructure in the Park*

Early I-C technology users are, to begin with, alone within the greater social order. Without the support of other users of an interactive technology, they have no communication partners and there is little impetus for the provision or broadening of an infrastructure to support the technology. Although repeatedly frustrated in his attempts to make Park administrators aware of the need for technological infrastructure beyond telephones, Al Swenson kept trying. By 2009, they had added bits and pieces of I-C technological support—a wireless room here, a laptop there. The Park wasted many years before it arranged for the 'at our elbow' help Barbara and

others needed to progress with their computing. It wasn't until the Computer Club had attracted a *regular* attendance of thirty to forty individuals that Park administrators arranged for a larger room, a projection screen and a used computer to be available for the club in the very late 1990s; it took another couple of years to arrange for an Internet connection. It was not until 2004 (eight years after the inception of the Club) that administrators were persuaded by the Computer Club members to provide a few items of equipment like a proper computer projection system. The room in which this equipment was located was not a dedicated space for the Club. Unlike some other retirement communities, the administrators of Flamingo Park did not provide public computers for use by residents who did not own them. And in the absence of a computing center, there was no programmed instruction of a hands-on nature. Had the Park leaders had a more visionary view or understanding of I-C technology, many more Park residents might have learned to use computers or at least have gained some understanding of the phenomena that mass media outlets were promoting. How, indeed, can any retirement community not realize that computing has become of increasing interest to Seniors and has potential benefit for them?

#### *8. Traumatic Life Changes*

The deaths of their spouses had drastic impacts on the computer use of several husbands. Helmut R. became ever more depressed after his wife's death and his subsequent move to the Assisted Living building. Although he took his computer with him, he rarely used it and he did not take it to the NCC once transferred there; he spoke only of waiting to die. Illness and sensory loss also impacted use, as was the case with Dr. Q and several of the men suffering from macular degeneration. Cognitive decline resulted in the loss of interest in computing by several (mostly men) of the research participants. The burden of taking care of ill spouses was another reason for lessened computing.

### **D. Resolutions, Solutions and Social Support Networks**

#### *1. Opting Out*

Several of my study participants quietly stopped computing. Will Mahler and Myrtle Likert are examples of individuals who simply decided to occupy themselves with other tasks that they reportedly found satisfying. For Myrtle it was shopping and collecting, and for Will it was attending to his mail and watching old movies on TV. Will insisted, however, that his computing days were not necessarily over, and Myrtle's computer remained plugged in. Other



participants, such as Laslo, stopped their active computer use with vociferous protests about the failed promise of the technology.

## 2. *Redoubling Effort*

There were a few individuals who, like Barbara, decided to keep trying, despite many setbacks, to remain active computer users and explorers. Getting back to her computer became Barbara's primary motivation for enduring the many weeks of therapy following several surgeries and strokes. For this woman, multiple roadblocks constituted additional but worthwhile challenges to be added onto that of computing. Finally, she augmented her own mighty efforts with a proxy in the form of her friend, Sturgis Johnson.

## 3. *Proxies*

When several study participants found themselves unable to use their computers but not yet willing to give up their computing persona, they turned their keyboards over to others who became their proxies either temporarily or permanently. Laslo's secretary, Mary Jo, performed all of his important computing tasks with increasing frequency. She conducted his business, checked his stock portfolio, wrote his e-mail, and searched matters of interest under his direction and/or dictation. They were able to do so based on their complementary knowledge of the potential uses of the computing apparatus, which, in turn, rested on his personal experience of previous use. A similar situation existed in Samuel Dunlop's 'household' when his children used his computer on his behalf for a variety of purposes like sending e-mail to family members, conducting searches, executing print commands and the like. Also partially blind, Samuel, like Laslo, requested this help and instructed them on the tasks. These examples are of *on-site* proxy computer use. There is a *remote* proxy use now in effect as Sturgis Johnson (and the outside computer tutor, Cody Peabody) 'take over' the desktops of Park residents as Sturgis did for Barbara. If she were to reach the point of inability (due to poor vision or lack of hand functions, for example) to use *her* computer and directed Sturgis in its use from *his* computer, what would become of her status as computer/I-C technology user? There are more temporary proxy-ships that generally do not negate primacy of use. For example, Barbara acted as a proxy for her friend, Spencer, when she wrote letters for him on her computer. Whenever a computer tutor, Computer Club helper, or visiting family member took over the use of a resident's keyboard (to instruct, solve a problem, etc.), that too was a kind of proxy use. This typically short-term experience, however, did not obviate (and in fact ideally strengthened) continued use by the

computer owner. An interesting question arises with regard to proxies and computer use. If Laslo Unterweg, for example, is no longer able to see well enough to use his computer, do we subtract him from the pool of active users? Or, do we take into account the use of his computer three times a week by his secretary, Mary Jo? Clearly, he is still using his computer; thus, when considering the issue of I-C technologies in households, the concept of use should include that of proxies.

#### *4. Family and Friends*

No one I knew of in the Park used his/her/their computer without periodic or even continuous help. Family support was vital for many beginners. Their children (in the 1990s, those with positions in universities were the most common donors) donated computer hardware to them and dispatched *their* children to help the grandparents figure it out. Of course, such help could be a mixed blessing since the younger generations (most especially grandchildren and great grandchildren) had interests in and approaches to computing which were not always helpful for older novice users. Some Park couples explored computing together, attending classes and giving each other moral support. Even if one partner became the dominant user (which was usually the case), the other continued to encourage and support her/his efforts. But, other individuals, such as Neva and Peter Evans, did not achieve a meeting of the minds on the new technology. And, as Neva's remarks suggested, when it was the male partner who was less interested or capable, he did not acquiesce quite so willingly as wives did to being "left behind." Such technologically "decoupled" individuals, like other Park residents who were divorced, never married, and/or childless, had to rely on "outside" sources of support, such as other residents. Courses offered at nearby schools or even distant Elder Hostels were utilized by several residents but few reported them as useful because there was too little carry over to their home PC configurations.

#### *5. Computer Club*

Thus, for Park computer users, the Computer Club became the mainstay for novice and experienced residents alike. At their weekly meetings, attendees commiserated, struggled to mesh divergent interests and skills and watched each other come and go from 1995 onward. The co-leaders who kept it running were very instrumental in influencing new members' choices of hard/software, much to the dismay of the sole Mac user/member, who had no one to "talk to." Co-director, Al Swenson heavily promoted AOL as an Internet provider, although there were

dozens of private companies in the area. A few of the members who early on discovered JUNO, a free service provider for e-mail, eventually switched to AOL at the urging of other club members, especially before JUNO included an Internet browser in its services.

Another influential voice was that of Cody Peabody, a middle aged, male tech tutor who came into the Park to give talks at the Club, hold occasional group classes, and offer individual computer trouble shooting for a fee of \$80 per hour. He counseled club members to use AOL, Yahoo and, by 2002, Google for their Internet explorations; apparently, he was rather dogmatic in his suggestions. I joked with club members about being “AOL Zombies,” which reflected my misgivings about the manner in which they were locked into a rigid set of very few choices. For example, when I once suggested search engine “X” as an alternative to the hierarchical, indexed nature of Yahoo, club members expressed doubt, explaining that Cody had said they should all use the same thing so that he could help them better by keeping everyone on the same page, so to speak. But such is the nature of “help;” it is constrained by the skills, knowledge and biases of those who provide it. One may wonder if Neva and other tech novices would have had more gentle learning curves if they had not been discouraged from trying the Apple operating system as had been Neva’s original desire.

#### *6. Warm Support and Directional Help*

In reality, the Park computer users cared less about the content of Computer Club meetings and more about the group support that kept people attending. And equally important was the individualized, one-on-one, face-to-face, or side-by-side interactions among club members and with the co-directors that encouraged computing efforts in the face of perpetual frustration. This nurturing kind of support was offered by what one researcher calls “warm experts.”

They possess the knowledge needed to operate with a reasonable degree of success in the world or technology, but, at the same time, they are part of the user’s life-world and share experiences, interests and knowledge with them. Taking this position allows the warm expert to mediate between the . . . overwhelmingly diverse content of the medium, on the one hand, and the novice user’s concrete local situation, needs and background. (Bakardjieva 2006, 101)

Club members, Park neighbors, family members and I all served as warm experts for many of the computer users. Paid tutors from the outside, such as Cody Peabody, on the other hand, were more lukewarm or cold experts who were knowledgeable about Park life and people (in Cody’s case) but not friends or close associates (and motivated by payment). Without the presence of warm experts, many fewer Park residents would have ventured down a high-tech

pathway. Within a warm network of help and support the directionality of informal instruction was vertical (teacher/experienced computer user to student/novice user) and this verticality could go north or south generationally speaking. That is, the teacher might be one's grandchildren or, as in Neva's case, the student might be one's children. Instruction also had a horizontal directionality in which two individuals with similar knowledge levels instructed or advised each other. Although this tended to be gender limited, sometimes equally knowledgeable male and female residents shared technological discoveries with each other. There were also instances of horizontal help dyads that were cross-generational. Carmen Nouvel, for example, learned to compute long before her son reached adulthood but once he became computer accomplished, they engaged in mutual teaching and advising. What I never witnessed was a teacher/student relationship between married couples; nobody wanted to risk upsetting their mates.

### *7. Communal Support*

A more subtle and diffuse source of support for Park residents was the community itself. I noticed many instances of mutual support and encouragement in my visit with Park friends, especially in 2008. Some examples were: Neva praising both Elizabeth Dickerson and Barbara for their contributions to the Keep Well Committee and urging them to continue; Samuel trying to share his experiences with assistive devices with other people who lacked good vision; Sturgis and Samuel giving each A.L resident a print of the "portrait" that Sturgis had taken of them; and, of course, all the many hours over the years of computer tutoring at individual homes by Al, Don, Sturgis, the new CC co-director, George Brinkley, and others. Park residents supported one another in times of grief, as Neva pointed out, and in coping with all manner of illness and travail. Thus, the Park was a haven for many residents. The most obvious channel for mutual help was the volunteer program, which engaged about half of the community. It is not an exaggeration to say that many of the Park activities, events, services and its *heart* were formed from the blood, sweat and tears of residents themselves, many of whom could, like Barbara Howard, be called "ferocious volunteers." Older Americans are well trained in volunteerism, and the Park Administration had been able to persuade many residents that their volunteered labor helped, among other things, to forestall increases in living fees. The volunteer program helped residents become acquainted (one of the reasons people participated in the program), which fostered social interaction and friendships, which in turn encouraged the volunteer impulse. These friendships created the sense of ease by which CC members could visit one another's

residences when helping with computer-related problems. Over the years of my research, I witnessed a growing network of social support building around computer users, many of whom were totally reliant on in-Park assistance. Beyond this circle of Club members and other computer users, there was no other well-informed social network which could explain the mysteries of the home PC. Spouses and non-computing friends were not only not very interested in these technological forays, they were often studiously disinterested if not outright hostile.

## **E. Thrival Through Connecting**

### *1. Thrival or Survival?*

Two underlying questions of my research design involved the worthiness in the minds of older adults of the challenge of exploring I-C technologies; they were whether this exploration could add to their sense of thrival and whether social support was a necessary component in which to learn and thrive. Every Park resident I met agreed that computing constituted an enormous challenge and for this very reason, residents either embraced it or fled from it. The most frequently cited reasons for non-use were difficulty of the learning task and/or no envisioned use. Slowly and over the course of the twelve years of my research an increasing number of residents stated that they were computer owners. In the mid-nineties guesstimates were that a scant one hundred people in the Park used computers, and by 2008 George Brinkley, the new Club leader, estimated that three hundred or so people were computing. As to the thrival issue of improved cognition through computer use, only conjectures can be made.

Everyone, in the course of their computing journey at the Park, encountered frustration and felt a sense of desperate helplessness—even savvy Al Swenson when his computer ‘died’ in 2008. They recounted a Kafkaesque journey of stagnation, of waiting: waiting for something to happen on their screens, waiting for a connection to the Internet, waiting for a tutor to arrive, waiting on the telephone for a help desk explanation, waiting for understanding to descend. Some of these individuals who never got beyond a rudimentary use of e-mail were living Al Swenson’s nightmare of owning a \$3,000 mail machine. Can one consider these negative experiences a salutary contribution to thriving? Or, would we have to add up every positive and negative experience and weigh their totals? Even considered individually, it is difficult to say if Laslo, the most frustrated and angry user of all, benefited from his computer use. How can we know if his cognition was aided or thwarted in this process? As he would say, there is no

thrivometer with which to assess his progress. There were many computer owners who expressed positive sentiments about the things they had learned to do with this technology, although all of them had tales of regret as well—for the monetary cost, for time lost, for lack of success in their endeavors. And some of those who explored and declared themselves a failure, such as Helmut R., Laslo U. and Myrtle L., experienced states ranging from severe depression to disgust. When formulating my inquiry about thrival, I did not include the idea of a lessening of thrival, let alone of survival, as a possible outcome. However, it is more likely the case that the use of I-C technology did not cause a particular state of being but rather reflected (or possibly also intensified) the natural tendencies and inclinations of individuals. Thus Laslo, already an unhappy person by his own admission, grew unhappier, Barbara more determined and Neva more laid back while attempting to use their computing devices.

## 2. *Connecting and Congregating*

If we consider the question of the gregarious nature of human beings and the pleasure they find in social congregation and we further view that as an important component of thrival, we can say that the use of computers by the residents of Flamingo Park raised their thrival quotient substantially. Although the residents used their computers in the traditional manner and for the purposes of obtaining and creating information, communicating remotely and playing online games, they also tailored the technology to suit a different set of needs—sociability. True, some Park residents, such as Club founder Don Mc Donald, used their computers in a traditional, solitary manner with one person sitting in front of the monitor, manipulating the keyboard (this was the ideal arrangement in Don's view). In contrast to this conventional use, other Park residents generated a different scenario in which they created and fostered *in-person* (as opposed to remote) social networks. The following quote can supply the vocabulary and describe the countervailing scenarios,

When we borrow the term social from the world of social networking on the PC or mobile devices, our perspective focuses on the individual using a device to interact with other non co-located individuals. . . . Television supports co-located social behaviors such as spending time together and chatting about the content on the screen, and discourages social interactions that draw an individual's attention away from the collocated shared experience. (Zafiroglu 2008, 1)

What was clearly happening in the Park was that the *act* of computing or the issues *surrounding* uses of the computer (rather than the content or product via the computer) fostered large amounts of co-located social behaviors. Computer Club members visited each others' houses often as they worked together to resolve many computing problems, share discoveries

and instruct on new applications. (And the original Computer Club meetings were a much loved social occasion by the members.) Barbara Howard and Sturgis Johnson got together three evenings a week to work on her computer issues and socialize. Laslo Unterweg's secretary came to his cottage three days a week to do likewise—his only socializing opportunity. The most vibrant example of co-located socializing around a computer was that of Samuel Dunlop and his children. They had actual fun fests—"whooping and hollering"—when gathered around his computer searching, for example, for relatives in genealogical records. There was similar hilarity among them while using the computer to look up answers to questions raised on their favorite TV show, Jeopardy, as they simultaneously watched it. In so doing they created a complementary relationship between the two technologies in which each increased the pleasure quotient of the other. There is another way in which technologically facilitated co-located socializing occurred in the Dunlop family. This was during their ritualized Saturday night e-mailing of the relatives in which they typed for Samuel at his dictation. Of course, this happens in many households in the Park (and across the country) when two or more co-located individuals write or read computer-generated e-mail to and from remote family or friends. Nearly all of the spouses of the household's primary computer user in my research population did this. Thus, Park computer users had adopted and adapted their computers as a domestic technology around which co-located socializing occurred. And, unlike television, which takes up the aural space (as Zafiroglu describes it), the computer is a more quiet guest at the party.

### *3. Intimate Thrival*

Theorizing that socializing contributes to thrival and that intimate socializing might contribute even more, I will describe the ways in which romance and seduction occurred around the act of computing in the Park. The act of computing brought residents together around a shared interest, regardless of what practical application might have been involved. Rather than online romance, they bonded in person over their computer skills. Competence is always sexy and technological competence may be particularly so for those who are yearning to learn how to use it. Perhaps Barbara felt or hoped that she and Spencer were bonding over her computer expertise of which he made use. Shared computing clearly was an aspect of Neva Evan's relationship with her Park companion, Tally. Barbara's relationship with Sturgis that began as computer tutoring developed into a kind of "special friendship." She was one of the very few

residents whom he continued to help with such frequency. More broadly stated, the issue is that of intimacy, which is another crucial element in the process of thriving.

The elements of seduction include more than romance. It includes the aspects of time and attention, mitigating loneliness, achieving a modicum of local fame (through publication) and admiration (through helping), and the creation of couple-dom (no matter how temporary or tenuous as in the case of Barbara and Spencer). Computing technology in the Park generated rich, in-person social interaction—the Club meetings that included various guest speakers, the home tutoring, the drawing together of family (the children and grandchildren who came to help with computer set up and use), meeting with Park officials and so on. (There is a caveat, however which is that not all household participants received the same thrival benefits as the dominant computer user. There was a substantial number of ‘computer widows/ers’ whose isolation was increased when their spouses engaged in their solitary acts of computing. That is also a downside of the act of others’ thriving that I had not considered.)

The following list summarizes the ways that computing contributed to the thrival of some Park computers users:

- Enhancement of *in-person* family ties—cross generational and between spouses.
- Rationale for *in-person* support gathering.
- Meeting new people, expanding *in-person* support network.
- Tool of seduction; attracting people through competence and sought-after skills.
- Vicarious sharing of local events for shut-ins (photos of Park activities by Sturgis).
- Reversing time (AI using technology to relive the old days).
- Status symbol—sign of competence, intelligence, accomplishment, means.
- Renewal of curiosity and interest in life.

#### *4. Thriving with a Symbolic Computer*

Cottages and apartments in Flamingo Park are of modest dimensions. Most people who move there have probably had to drastically reduce the size and amount of their belongings. Thus, there is not much unclaimed space in their residences and the introduction and situating of the typical array of computer equipment constitutes a challenge. Once computer owners at the Park cleared a surface for these space hogs, they tended to stay put. The choice of placement for the computer often reflects something more than spatial convenience, however. It may indicate the importance of the technology in the thinking of the user, or it may reflect conflict among



residential members over its value. Is the computer equipment in the heart of the living space where it can be easily accessed and exhibited, or is it relegated to an out-of-the-way corner? Is it tucked away inside a makeshift cabinet or proudly sitting on a dedicated desk of its own? Is it ensconced in a second bedroom, thus shifting the definition of the room to that of an office? Is it in a private space that its user then considers a retreat? Is it kept out of sight with an air of surreptitious worry? I have found all of these situations among the Park residents with whom I have visited and “talked computing.” Four residents even brought their computers with them to the *much* smaller living areas of the assisted living and nursing home sections of Park, reflecting the high value they placed on them.

Neva’s peripatetic computer provided an interesting example of how physical placement is both influenced by forces within one’s life *and* reflective of its value for its owner. There were rich layers of meaning in Neva’s computing behavior and multiple rationales for her choices of computer type and locations. To be sure, having a portable computer allows more freedom of movement, but for uncertain users disconnecting and reconnecting even a laptop is a matter for some deliberation. While Neva’s husband was alive, she was a discreet computer user, confining her modest hardware to a small space as far removed from her husband’s domains (sunroom/TV watching area and master bedroom) as possible. But as Neva’s e-mail to me suggested, the element of aesthetics entered her thinking as well. Her story well illustrates how personal relationships shape the exploration of new technologies, and we can wonder at Neva’s perseverance in the face of a non-supportive mate. We can see that the physical placement of her computer equipment paralleled and reflected some of the dramatic changes of her life like the loss of a spouse, followed by grief, followed by the excitement of romance with Tally.

Of the four members of my research population who transported their computers to the single room residence in Assisted Living and the Nursing Care Center, two were eventually unable to use them as computers due to physical and cognitive diminishment. Nevertheless, they kept them displayed, set up, and ready for use (not, however, by visiting relatives, whose visits were rare). For Dr. Q, a former psychiatrist, it was clear that his displayed computer was important as a symbol of general intelligence and former capability, though his wife thought it a foolish use of space. Two individuals, Will Mahler and Myrtle Likert, no longer used their computers, but Myrtle kept hers plugged in and Will vowed (even though his machine had been in disrepair for a year) that he was not done with computing. Whether by openly displaying them

or by virtue of known ownership, Park computers owners appeared to be proud of the fact that they were (at least in the eyes other residents) conversant in Technology. Thus, the use of their computers as communicative symbols contributed to a sense of thrival among Park residents.

## **F. Assistive Technology for Survival and Thrival**

### *1. Perfect Storms*

Samuel Dunlop was one of the most proactive users of assistive technology in the Park. While he found much of it wanting in function and design, he was a willing guinea pig for any new developments in this field. His circumstances were common to many residents in their eighth and ninth decades of life. Interestingly, those residents who were over 100 years of age were often healthier than their younger counterparts, and the increasing numbers of centenarians prompts a consideration of the societal ramifications of this aging trend. I use the idea of a ‘perfect storm’ to envision a kind of negative synergism in which an existing problem is aggravated, when combined with another problematic situation. My experiences in Flamingo Park have led me to reflect on a number of such storms I see brewing in our society. Given the demographic imperative of a rapidly aging population, one top heavy with the “oldest old” individuals, several troublesome scenarios can be imagined within the context of I-C technology use and development:

- Rapid technological change *plus* inexorable aging of the population, the members of which will require continual retraining to keep up.
- Sensory deficits common in the older adult population *plus* the increasing rate of speaking, careless articulation of speech and an increase in non-native speakers in positions of help (help desks, care taking, health workers, both nurses and doctors); when two primary sensory organs are impaired the resulting impact is more than doubled, particularly when the larger society compounds the problem by intensifying the input. Laslo’s attempt to use closed captioning is a good example; ideally, the printed text should substitute for the aural portion of the event but as human speech speeds up there is barely enough time to read (let alone digest) the continuously moving print even if one’s vision and/or brain processing are not compromised.
- Compromised manual dexterity (resulting from strokes, arthritis, etc.) *plus* the micro sizing of I-C devices which are virtually impossible to manipulate with aching hands and gnarled fingers.
- Growing numbers of retirees heading southward to live *plus* the increasing climatological changes resulting in more intense and frequent storms *plus* aging and fragile electrical infrastructure on which we rely to power our technologies. What provisions are being made to deal with the frequent and sometimes disastrous loss of power in parts of the

country that are storm prone? How is it possible that in such areas the institutions housing vulnerable segments of our population are not by law prepared to cope with these not uncommon emergencies? Flamingo Park sets up cots in the Assembly Building for the residents of the small cottages to sleep on when storms hit. This building does not have adequate toilet facilities for large numbers of people nor is cot sleeping a pleasant experience for anyone over the age of 12 and certainly not for aged bodies and brittle bones. There were just a few generators and Park staff spoke of having to save gas while using them. Not only were bodily survival needs in peril but the means to communicate – in-house, locally, nationally, globally—were also disrupted. None of this addresses the destruction of a vast array of electricity-dependent devices, including expensive products such as computers/hardware that can be destroyed due to electrical malfunctions.

## *2. Assisting with Technology*

While the challenges of weather and power grids are outside of the scope of this discussion, there are some points to be made regarding the first three storms. For several decades, scholars and researchers have been discussing the ways in which I-C (and other) technological devices could be used to improve the care of the frail elderly and to ameliorate the sensory losses experienced by otherwise healthy older adults. Since their inception, PCs have aroused strong feelings regarding their needlessly complex programs. At a forum held twenty years ago on how technologies might assist the elderly to continue to live at home, one expert noted some of the contradictions of the issue.

Enormous change in the attitudes of professionals toward the needs of the elderly has already taken place. . . . But as reflected in the slow development of technologies, attitudes of consumers and manufacturers are complex and have been negative. There is a feeling that this is a population that may not merit attention. . . . As a whole, they are considered a non-productive group and uninterested in technology. Is the investment worth it? Who will pay? We are talking about expensive resources. (Katzowitz 1989,15)

Panelists at that forum agreed on three ways that PCs could be made more user-friendly: “1) the program should not require a great deal of learning; 2) It must be simple to operate; 3) it must be simple to correct mistakes” (14). It was also suggested that marketers had a role to play in the acceptance by the public of assistive technologies. To start with they could re-brand them from “technologies for aging” to “technologies for living” or for “safe living at home” (16). The panelists discussion concluded on this note,

We have done better with the extension of life from a quantitative point of view than a qualitative one. . . . We must adapt technologies that will enable elders to extend their usefulness to us and to feel themselves useful. . . . They are the wise and they can return much back to us. If we can help them do that, we will be a better society. (17)

Twenty years later, marketers have gotten the message. In the past two years, there has been a marked increase, in senior-oriented publications, of ads that offer to simplify the

computing process. In 2008, computer courses were thought to be the answer; in a full page ad the copy read,

Learn to use your computer in only three days! Guaranteed! Are you frustrated by your computer? If so, you'll absolutely love our new beginner's computer course. No matter how angry and intimidated your computer makes you feel, this course will let you master your computer in only three days. . . . Every lesson . . . is explained in PLAIN ENGLISH. There's no confusing computer jargon. No technical language [emphasis in the original]. (*AARP Bulletin*, May 2008, 11)

A different approach to the problem of complicated computer programs was offered one year later. Another full page ad for "Go" computers featured a photo of a large flat screen monitor, a very large keyboard with nine colored keys, an ergonomic track ball mouse and lots of text,

Finally. . . . A Computer that's designed for YOU, Not your Grandchildren!. . . for 75 cents a day, remote controllers deal with crashes and screen freezes and remote data storage . . . no confusing icons, tool bars, cascading windows, or computer jargon. . . . It's a shame that the very people who could benefit most from Email and the Internet are the ones that have the hardest time accessing it. (*AARP Bulletin*, Oct. 2009, 25)

Manufacturers have also become attuned to the complaints regarding another I-C device—cell phones—and are now marketing them to address problems of potential older users. With a name designed to remind older adults of their halcyon days, the "jitterbug," marketers started with the issue of simplification. In the fall of 2008 a one-third page ad stated, "It doesn't play games, take pictures or give you the weather" (*AARP Bulletin* Oct. 2008, 8). A year later, a full page ad for this product addressed another important concern—that of micro-sizing products, "over the years, cell phones have become smaller and smaller with so many complicated features. They are harder to program and harder to use. But the jitterbug has simplified everything" (*AARP Bulletin* Nov. 2009, 2).

During the more than twenty-year lag between the recommendations of researchers in the 1980s and the design changes of the late 2000s toward device simplification and enlargement, the population of older Americans has grown. Apparently there is now a sufficiently critical mass of older adults to pressure changes that might be of assistance to them. How will this tension between the push to slow down and simplify technology coordinate with the pull of the ever swifter pace of technological innovation? Some societal analysts point out that the next wave of retirees (the Baby Boom generation) will be more computer literate and therefore will be able to use this form of I-C technology more effectively than the current older generation, and so the problem of technological illiteracy will gradually resolve itself. This assertion only begs the question of what new form of technology today's middle agers or young-old will face (assuming

that the current pace of technological innovation continues) that challenges their ability to keep up in their oldest years. One solution must be to increase the resources for life-long education and training not only for survival purposes but also for thrival.

Despite the serious struggle to learn the language of computing that I witnessed among Park residents, I would recommend the use of I-C technology for older adults, especially those suffering from various debilitating health problems. Interacting—however minimally—with colorful and moving images on a lighted screen can be an improvement over the usual scenario of a group of people staring into space while seated in the day room of a nursing facility. Listening to audible stories can likewise alleviate the endless boredom of severely circumscribed living. I envision a network connecting many retirement communities around the country in which residents could chat with those with whom they share a set of life experiences. This would be of interest as a means to alleviate the loneliness of elders such as Laslo U. and Myrtle L. who might branch out to a wider diversity of conversants. This is one means by which such communities could help to create and foster the social connecting recommended by life span theorists and other gerontologists.

### **G. Ongoing Issues with I-C Technology and Older Adults**

#### *1. What Distinguishes Senior Citizen Learners from Junior Citizen Learners Is a Burden of Proof—To Be More Accomplished, to Know More, to Be the Wise Elders*

Threaded throughout the comments of Park residents and popular accounts (cited in the introduction) of older computer users is the theme of pride of accomplishment. This is most often mentioned with reference to grandchildren. The idea is to seem “cool,” “with it,” capable, intelligent and worthy in the eyes of the youngest members of the junior citizenry. This burden is not shared by the young who are *expected* to be in the learning stages of their lives. Yes, they experience pressures from parents, teachers and peers but that is the nature of things for young students. It is the natural task of childhood to learn one’s culture. One would have hoped, by contrast, that by virtue of attaining old age-hood, Senior citizens could rest assured in that accomplishment and could take their natural place as keepers of history, storytellers, perpetuators of tradition. This has been the situation in most societies throughout time. But this is clearly not the case in a youth-oriented, innovation worshipping culture like the U.S. If elders want to be heard by the young who are caught up in I-C technologies, they have to learn something about youth interests. Even if their grandchildren cannot remove their ear buds long enough to hear

them, many older adults want to at least know what kids are talking about, as the neighbor of Marion Probst told her (in 1996). Al Swenson wanted more than just a hearing; he sought an active experience of influence—both on and from his progeny. Among Flamingo Park residents, the burden of appearing smart enough to talk ‘tech-ese’ resulted variously in satisfaction for those who succeeded and embarrassment or shame for those who failed the challenge.

## *2. Learning/Using Earlier Info-Communication Technologies Does Not Adequately Serve as a Primer for Learning/Using Newer Computer-Based I-C Technology*

The functional equivalence hypothesis traces the evolution of communication technologies from in-person conversation, to long-distance means (postal, telephone), to broadcast media (cinema, radio, TV) and theorizes that the “Internet can combine and meld the functions and features of both personal and mass forms of communication” (Robinson and De Hann 2006, 52). With regard to Internet usage in daily activities, particularly for communication, this hypothesis stipulates that “as Internet usage becomes more prominent, its displacement of alternative activities becomes more substantial” (52).

Although today’s info-communication technologies purport to build upon the previous tele devices (*graph, phone, vision*), they are radically different in the following ways. These earlier devices were easy to use, entailing a very modest learning curve. One picked it up or turned it on, with perhaps a few minor adjustments for sound or color balance. TV use was or could be a relatively passive activity. Computing, by contrast, is a devilishly different prospect with a steep learning curve. As Neva Evans observed with only a slight degree of hyperbole, she had to take a class just to learn how to turn the machine on. As far from passive as one can imagine, a computer amounts to a true brain—machine face off. With regard to earlier I-C technology, it was never necessary to take a course on how to dial a phone or turn on/tune a television set. There is no verb *to television*. But there is an enormous amount of *to compute* needed in order to use the machine effectively. Rather than the passive action of *watching*, computers (at least until the advent of ‘videos’ in various forms) entailed the much more active, *looking at and acting on* the apparatus.

## *3. Integrating Computers into the Domestic Environment Is a More Challenging Prospect, Particularly so for Older Adults, than Is Generally Acknowledged*

The literature on domesticating technology expresses the expectation that each generation of new I-C technology will be brought in the household and integrated therein.

As the computer technology diffuses and becomes gradually domesticated . . . we need to supplement traditional evaluation metrics, such as productivity and efficiency, with those that take into consideration aesthetics, convenience, family dynamics, and the social and emotional needs of household members. . . . The domestic space can be described in terms of three main elements: social space, technological space and physical space. . . . The technological space consists of the household technologies that are embedded in the physical space and used by the members of the family as part of the social space. (Vankatesh, Chen and Gonzalez 2006,109; 110-11)

Park residents have shown me that while their computers may have been *domesticated* they were not readily or easily—or in some instances ever—*tamed*. The wanderings of Neva Evans' computer provide an example of noteworthy *dis-integration* as her husband contested the three aspects of domestic space described above. It took nine years, from 1996 to 2005, and his death for her computing system to reach its final and satisfactory destination within her household. The computers of other Park residents were moved about through their households as family sizes and interests changed. Those with second bedrooms soon converted them to home offices to house their computers, thereby encroaching on a space for guests and visiting relatives. But when further downsizing of physical space was required as CCRC residents shifted to assisted living or nursing care *rooms*, how did technological space mesh with physical space? In addition to her computer and desk Barbara Howard could squeeze only two armchairs, one desk, one dresser, one bookcase, one card table, one TV and one narrow bed into her room at A.L.

If I-C technological devices and uses are to be successfully integrated into the households of the elderly, the “domestic space” may have to be reconfigured. The complexity of the devices needs to be more appreciated and planned for. One researcher contrasts computers with televisions on the scale of demand and nurturance.

While the placement of a television may be conspicuous, it is not a demanding technology, but a simple one. What people like about their televisions is that they do not demand as much attention as other technologies (for example: personal computers that are fragile and need input to ‘do’ anything), yet their presence is comforting and enables the smooth flow of domestic life. (Zafiroglu and Asokan 2009, 5)

As a domestic technology, computers are more like the sewing machine than a telephone or television. For example, in the late 1940s, my mother attended a course of several weeks' duration for learning to use a new sewing machine. It was given by and in the store where she bought it, using *her* machine and with one to one instructor-learner ratio. It entailed not only sewing projects but also machine control and maintenance (many things from continuous thread tension adjustment to frequent oiling). My mother was highly motivated by the strong need to clothe her family, which she did successfully for many decades.

How do computer courses compare with hers? Although there are now in local communities increasing numbers and kinds of courses on computing at junior colleges and adult education courses, none of them approaches the ideal learning set up offered by the sewing machine store. The major challenge of computer courses is the differing learning levels of attendees which sorely compromise curriculum planning. The ratio of teaching can range from one instructor to ten to forty students. Generally, the machines in these classes are IBM clones and not the most recent vintage (except for courses offered at universities), and not the ones that will be used by the learners (except for owners of laptops). Why did no retailers offer individualized courses in the use of computers in the 1990s, for example, when they were very costly and relatively uncommon in homes? What became of the concept of formalized training for in-home use?

#### *4. Computers and Their Attendant Equipment Are not Ideal Vehicles for Either Communication or Information for Older Americans*

There was a general and underlying question in my discussion with Will Mahler about whether he would consider repairing his dysfunctional computer in order to communicate with his distant family members. It was, why should anyone spend thousands of dollars to make a phone call? He could telephone his sons in New Zealand many times over before it would add up to the cost of a computing system. And this does not take into account the time and emotional costs of learning and sustaining computing.

Pundits have pronounced the new info-communication technologies—with the Internet at their center—to represent a major cultural shift. One discernible form of cultural movement has been a technological *pushing*. For some of the older people who talked to me, it seemed more like *shoving* as they listened to television and radio announcers rattle off incomprehensible letters. More than one member of the research population in Flamingo Park commented that at every turn they heard, “H-T-P or something” and “WWWs everywhere.” These individuals did not know in the mid to late 1990s how to translate or make use of the letters. But they were increasingly realizing that these arcane symbols were shunting them to the sidetrack within some larger cultural context.

Since that time, those widely-advertised letters have become so integrated into the national technological consciousness that the need to say them has nearly vanished. First the ‘HTTP’ was rendered unnecessary; then the ‘WWW’ too was omitted. Finally, came the advice, “for more information on this story, go to “NPR dot org” which is not necessarily



comprehensible for the uninitiated. Those who did try to work with “all the letters” complained that they could rarely get the “addresses” (i.e. the URLs) typed into the “box” correctly and thus could not even get onto the super highway they were hearing about. (Seasoned computer users may recall that once upon a time the copy/paste option was not useable outside of the word processing domain.)

To many Park computer users their machine seemed unforgiving, no matter how hard they tried to placate it. This was the implication in their complaints as they suffered through the unforeseen consequences of errant keystrokes and mouse clicks and had to “give up” a task. Truth to tell, personal computers can be remarkably unstable and unreliable—in form as well as function. They require continual patching and software updating, not to mention protection from external intrusions. They wear out and become obsolete much faster than many other ‘domestic technologies.’ If machine functionality gets in the way of content, of what use is the latter? If content is obscured by form it is not accessible in any meaningful way.

Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation and my expertise to make in-depth suggestions regarding interface design, it must at least be mentioned, given the concerns of the members of my research population. In addition to mechanical issues, beginning and intermediate level users were undone by the amount of information confronting them on their computer screens. Myrtle Likert was the most extreme example of the inability to choose any one ‘item’ (icons, words, menus etc.) to focus on while trying to execute a given task. But more experienced users had similar difficulties. Barbara Howard was losing track of where things were on her desktop as a result of her simultaneous cognitive slowing and the increasing complexity of her operating system. Shneiderman’s (2000) notion of “evolutionary learning,” which includes “progressive disclosure” of the contents of computers, is intriguing in this context. If, as he suggests, users could control the presentation of the content, they could better match their skill level with the machine capabilities. But, the notion of evolutionary learning would have to include the design for a devolution of learning ability such that the user could also de-complexify the program, as needed.

The difficulty of the matter is well expressed in an article by interface design scholars,

Automation, iteration and branching get to the heart of computing, both the power and the complexity of programming. No matter how helpful, congenial, benign or graphical the interface, once these features are available, end users are in some way programming and will need to acquire the basic concepts of trying to plan for unexpected and unwanted outcomes such as dead ends, anomalous inputs and outputs and appropriate termination. (Twidale and Cameron, 2005, 71)

The elderly end users whom I interviewed had neither the interest nor the time to become programmers.

### **H. A Gentle General Question**

Over a long course of time I participated in the lives of older individuals who were exploring a new generation of information-communication technologies, especially computers. I observed how these older adults triumphed and despaired over their mini successes and failures with the machine, absorbing both kudos and blows to their self-esteem along the way. I noted the fact that they needed enormous amounts of help and assistance in this endeavor and that they spent considerable sums from dwindling resource banks (of time, energy and money) in the process. There were gains and there were losses in their ‘accounts’ and I cannot be the final arbiter of which was greater since the last chapter of their lives had not been written.

All of this took place in what many people would regard as ideal living conditions for the aging and elderly. In less felicitous circumstances major learning challenges would presumably incur greater costs. Are we justified then in assuming (as mass media and academic literature suggest) that older adults *should* want and *should* be urged to undertake this arduous journey? Are we ignoring the positive aspects of non-adoption of new technology? Although not the focus of my research, the phenomenon of non-use of I-C technology is relevant, if only to set into relief the motivations for its use. Within Flamingo Park it was not known at the time of my study exactly how many residents were using computers. (Since there were no systematic surveys made by Park administrators on the activities of the residents—other than their living or dying—it was impossible to know with certainty what kinds of technological devices residents owned or used.) Whether the educated guess by current Computer Club leader, George Brinkley, that there were then approximately 30% of the Park residents who owned computers, was an over or under estimation, it is indisputable that a significant majority of residents did not. Based on my observations and the passing remarks made or conveyed to me by and about non users, my impression is that there were many contented computer-less people in Flamingo Park.

Why this was so, is an open question. It may be that they basked in the knowledge that they had achieved contentment sufficient to see them through the rest of their lives. Perhaps they were not tuned in so closely to the news media to be bothered by or unduly curious about the ubiquitous pointers to websites, or they had effectively screened them out. In reality, given the

circumstances of old age-hood, non-use for many individuals is understandable. One researcher describes these circumstances quite well.

The constraints of old age are not only material but may derive from ill health, loss of social networks, and unfamiliarity with the new. . . . The “problem,” if it is a problem, comes from the lack of resources to move along the learning curve inherent in the need to adapt to any new technology. This insufficiency might be material, but it also derives from reduced energy and, in the sense of perceived life span, even of available time. . . [O]lder people are exposed to new ways of doing things that belong to an era in which they will only marginally participate. Virtually all people who are young today will, when they are older, be able to operate a computer without difficulty. Yet they will face new processes when older which they will find difficult and that will not warrant their time or effort to learn to use. A learning curve is like a playground slide: although once to the top it is possible to enjoy the ride, getting up the stairs to the slide’s starting point becomes increasingly difficult with age. (Raban and Brynin 2006, 43-44)

Rather than ask why older people choose not to adopt ‘new’ I-C technologies, the better question might be, why on earth would they? This is a question that I have attempted to answer in this dissertation.

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## APPENDIX A

### OUTLINE OF OBSERVATION GUIDE WITH TWO FOCI, INDIVIDUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL

#### 1. Individual Focus

- ✓ Residential Setting
  - Technological devices in household
  - Computing devices present: space allocated; set up; use of
  - Others sharing space: family; apartment mates
- ✓ Computer Club Setting (when applicable)
  - Role in club: sporadic or regular member; presenter; founder; officer
  - Use of resources available through club: hardware, instruction; support
- ✓ Social Support Settings
  - Purpose of participation; type of interaction with others
  - Role of individual in setting
  - Outside Park: existence/role of friends, family in town or nearby areas
- ✓ Recreational/Entertainment Event in Park
  - Interaction with others: solo or joint attendance
  - Participation: planning, producing, performing
- ✓ Activity outside Park
  - Means of getting to outside activity
  - Type, purpose and derived benefit

#### 2. Institutional Focus

- ✓ Information Resources and Venues: creators, providers; intent
  - Park libraries: size, type, organization, print size
  - Closed circuit TV channels: content, function, access means
  - Published/circulated news organs: flyers, bulletins
  - Publicly displayed signs, posters, announcements, bulletins, flyers
  - Publicly accessible computing: labs, rooms, instruction; laptop hookups
  - Residential readiness: ISDN lines; cable hookups; Satellite dishes
- ✓ Instructional Resources
  - Arranged classes: subjects, rationale; paid instruction; resident instruction
  - Workshops (arts and crafts): space; instruction
  - Lectures, speakers, demonstrations (cooking, sewing, etc)
- ✓ Support Systems
  - Clubs
  - Volunteer Networks, Organization, Recruitment
  - Advisory/feedback opportunities: committees, boards
  - Governance: opportunities to serve, vote, direct
  - Events: dedications; holiday activities
- ✓ Recreation/Fitness Resources
  - Fitness space, equipment; pools; training staff
  - Areas designated for: golf, tennis, shuffleboard and so on.
  - Activities/planning/supervision for varying levels of abilities
- ✓ Entertainment Activities
  - Internal: produced by residents or with Park funds: variety shows, performances
  - External: performances arranged by Park; imported and transported to
  - Trips, tours: kinds, choices, costs
  - Meals (external): arranged, transported
- ✓ Religious/Counseling Activities
  - Private religious observances: allocated space/time
  - Park sponsored religions, services, pastors: allocated space/time
  - Availability of counseling: space, staff; individual, group; workshops
- ✓ Transportation
  - Park shuttles: destination, frequency, pick up places
  - Chauffeured cars: cost; radius; convenience (pick up arrangements)

## **APPENDIX B**

### **SAMPLE TOPIC GUIDELINE**

Sample topics regarding information needs:

- Health: care givers, medications, pharmaceuticals, equipment, illness, accidents
- Social support: friends, voluntary associations, community/residential
- Communication: friends, family, associates
- Financial: income, investments, taxes, banking; bill paying
- Family: connectivity, local and remote interaction
- Transport: means, maintenance of vehicles, purchases
- Clothing: choices, purchase opportunity, special types
- Current events/world news: means and medium, accessibility
- Legal: wills, trusts, advice
- Recreation/leisure: local & remote travel, events, media accessibility
- Spiritual, religious, philosophical

Sample topics regarding information resources and technologies:

- Kinds of resources used and available: newsprint, traditional mass media, digitized technologies, for example
- Knowledge of new technologies: what and how obtained
- Feelings towards all information technologies and, specifically towards, ‘new’ ones, such as word processors and computing systems
- Experience with technology, old and new
- Interest in exploration of new technologies
- Disabling conditions with regard to use of technologies
- Interest in exploration of other ‘new’ trends in current society

Sample topics regarding quality of life:

- Degree of satisfaction, happiness with life
- Understanding of and feeling about concepts of elderly, old, senior, aging
- Causes of dissatisfaction
- Assessment of accomplishments
- Present expectations, goals
- Existence/importance of family ties

## APPENDIX C

### TWO SURVEY FORMS

#### Survey 1. Tech Inventory

How many of each do you have in your residence?

Telephones: Special Options: call waiting, forwarding, conferencing, caller ID  
Answering machines; Voice mail service; Voice amplification

TVs: Web TV, High Definition

VCRs

TiVo

Radios

Short Wave radio/current ham operating license

Record players/turn tables

CD players

Tape deck players

DVD players

Electric/ manual typewriters

Word Processors

Computers/laptop

Video game machines/devices

Web cam?

Printers

Scanners/Copiers

Fax Machine

Internet connection service

Specialized software: voice recognition, games

Cars/current operating license

Other motorized vehicles

Other electronic devices, conveniences?

Use of:

ATM machines

Electronic or online banking, billing services

Purchases over the Internet

Other transactions over the Internet

What is your preferred mode of communication (in order)?

Face to face?

Letter/postal?

Telephone?

E-mail?

Fax?

Other?



## Survey 2. Information Resources Survey

### I

Tell me about your family ties  
Do you have old friends whom you keep in touch with?  
Who are your current, local friends?  
What are your favorite activities to do with friends?  
Why/how did you choose to live in this residence community?  
What is your life like here?  
What are your daily/weekly activities?  
How do you get around?

### II

How do you learn about current events and daily news?  
What are your favorite radio and TV programs? How often do you watch/listen?  
Do you subscribe to any publications? What are they?  
Do you use a library regularly? Enjoy reading?  
If you needed critical information, where would you go to obtain it?  
Do you need help with any daily tasks? Do you know how/where to get help when you need it?

### III

Have you been hearing lately about WWW or the Internet?  
What is it? How do people use it?  
Have you heard about e-mail, know anybody who has it?  
Would you like to use the Internet or e-mail? Whom would you write to?

### IV

Do you have a computer at home? What do you use it for?  
How many hours a day do you spend using it? Does your spouse use a computer?  
Are you connected to the Internet? How?

### V

Would you like to learn about computers?  
Do you have any plans to buy one or take classes in computing?  
Do you know where you could use one?  
Have you ever used one? Where?  
How do you feel about computers?  
Does anyone in your family use one? Do they think you should try computing?  
Do any of your friends have computers?  
Would you try it if someone showed you how?

Note: This is a guide only; there is no fixed order or format for making inquiries about varying aspects of people's lives. This particular set of questions indicates the kinds of information that is of interest for this research study.

**APPENDIX D**  
**CONSENT FORMS: FIRST AND SECOND VERSIONS**

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



I hereby give my permission to have my conversation with Norma Linton recorded either by tape recorder or with written notes.

I understand that the purpose of our discussions is academic research for her doctoral degree in the field of Library and Information Science. The subject of her study is how people obtain information to satisfy their daily needs and the ways in which computing technologies assist (or hinder) this.

I understand that she may want to publish part or all of our conversations as a dissertation, article, conference paper or book (in either paper or electronic forms), in the future. Ms. Linton assures me that my identity\* will be kept confidential and that she will treat any permanent records (notes, audio tapes, transcriptions) in such a way as to conceal my identity.

I understand that I may excuse myself from participation at any time, should that be my wish.

This permission form refers to past as well as presents conversations we may have regarding the subject of her studies.

-----  
NAME

DATE

[For further information or verification, please contact: Prof. Bertram Bruce through:  
E-mail: [[chip@uiuc.edu](mailto:chip@uiuc.edu) or [chipbruce@mac.com](mailto:chipbruce@mac.com)]  
or Telephone: (217) 244-3576 or Letter: GSLIS; 501 E. Daniel St. Champaign, IL 61820]

*\*Addendum:*

I hereby waive my right to the protection of my identity. I give Ms. Linton permission to use either my NAME and/or LIKENESS (photograph, voice recording) or IMAGES OF MY HOME/COMPTER SET UP in the above-mentioned 'publications.'

-----  
NAME

DATE

I give my permission to have my conversation with Norma Linton recorded.

I understand that the purpose of these discussions is academic research for her degree in the field of Library and Information Science. The subject of her study is how people obtain information to satisfy their daily needs and the way in which computing technologies assist (or hinder) this.

I understand that she may wish to publish part or all of our conversations as an article, a dissertation or a book in the future. Ms. Linton assures me that my identity will be kept confidential and that she will code any permanent record (notes, audio tapes, transcriptions) in such a way as to conceal my identity.

I understand that I may excuse myself from participation at any time, should that be my wish.

This permission form refers to past as well as present conversations we may have regarding the subject of her studies.

---

NAME

DATE

[For further information/verification, please contact: Prof. Bertram Bruce; (217)333-3280; chip@uiuc.edu]

I give my permission to have my conversation with Norma Linton recorded.

I understand that the purpose of these discussions is academic research for her degree in the field of Library and Information Science. The subject of her study is how people obtain information to satisfy their daily needs and the way in which computing technologies assist (or hinder) this.

I understand that she may wish to publish part or all of our conversations as an article, a dissertation or a book in the future. Ms. Linton assures me that my identity will be kept confidential and that she will code any permanent record (notes, audio tapes, transcriptions) in such a way as to conceal my identity.

I understand that I may excuse myself from participation at any time, should that be my wish.

This permission form refers to past as well as present conversations we may have regarding the subject of her studies.

---

NAME

DATE

[For further information/verification, please contact: Prof. Bertram Bruce; (217)333-3280; chip@uiuc.edu]

## APPENDIX E

### INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE BRINKLEY, COMPUTER CLUB CO-LEADER (10/08)

#### 1. An Introduction

George and his partner moved into Flamingo Park in July, 2004 and chose to live in Highview Place, the newest apartment building (completed in 2004) where, according to George, the residents had a lower average age than the rest of the Park; they very probably had greater net worths than many other Park residents. This building was the only one wired for Internet connections (with a T1 service for each apartment). With his background in computer science and the aging of the ‘old guard’ leaders of the Computer Club, George soon found himself responsible for running the Club. He had been kind enough to include me on the Club mailing list since we last met in 2005, so I was at least aware of the agendas proposed for Club meetings. While visiting the Park in 2008, I wanted to get an update on Club members and their activities by talking with George who continued as the Club co-leader. George was 72 at the time of our interview.

#### 2. The Interview

George and I met in the Party Room of Highview Place. That room had been outfitted with a modest amount of equipment, a podium and audio system and had become the new location for the Computer Club meetings. This room and the adjacent lobby were ‘hot spots’ where wireless connectivity was provided. Any visitors to the Park could go to these two areas to access the Internet with their laptops. Although an improvement over the previous Club location, the Party Room still wasn’t set up optimally for Club purposes.

George: And we’re in the process of changing our wiring system so that we will be able to set up a station here in the front [of the room]. Right now it is a little awkward because we have to use the cabinets in the back of the room and that is where the computer connects. Well, if you have a speaker in the front of the room, you have to have a second person running the computer. . . . So we’re changing it and trying to get the setup in the front, which will make it easier because we’ve had speakers who, oh basically refused to give a program because it’s so awkward for them.

NL: What kind of speakers? Resident speakers or . . .

George: Oh, no, these were people from the outside, so we’re trying to make that accommodation. I think it’s a good one but they’re waiting for the cable.

A major change that George reported was that he and a few others involved in Club programs decided to decrease meeting times from twice a month, year round, to once a month, September to May. It had become “difficult to sustain interest” in more frequent meetings. George or his Club co-leader conducted the meetings every other month and on alternate months, Cody Peabody presided. Cody had a computer-related business in the area that included an in-home computer tutoring service. He had been invited to speak at the Computer Club since its early years. Cody was, over the years, hired by various Park residents to help with their computers, from hardware set up to trouble shooting hard and software problems. George described some typical Club meeting topics:

Cody . . . because he is in the business, he typically comes in and discusses some facet of computing or the industry or the direction that it’s going, where we’re [i.e. the Club leaders] trying to target our programs more to specific applications that the residents can actually use. . . . [Our] last program was to encourage people to develop a medical-summary sheet . . . And then we provided [them] with an e-mail attachment, word documents . . . where they could just go in and edit and put their own information in. And I’ve had some response, people telling me that they’re in the process of doing it and it is a difficult thing to bring everything together. But once it’s done, than all they have to do is modify it as necessary, so. . . . we’re encouraging people to do that.

Some [other] . . . topics have been like security of the computer; how to make the computer work for you; . . . explaining some of the things that can happen—and these are specifics like if they get error messages, what are the three or four steps they need to go through to identify if it’s a problem they can solve or if it is a problem they can call someone to solve. And how [chuckles] hopefully, they deal with technical support. And we talk about the Internet service providers.

I asked George about who was attending the Club meetings—whether it was practiced users or beginners.

Some of the beginners are not coming because they feel like they don’t have the skills to understand what’s going on. Of course I’m trying to encourage them at least to come to our sessions that—where we’re going much more into a tutorial or teaching mode. And so that’s—but yeah, they seem to be a bit reluctant. Basically, our composure of the group is we have usually around 40 and it’s usually about the same people. There’s probably 60 that come and go for the most part and any given time, we’ll have about 40 or so. . . . Cody says this group, meaning Flamingo Park, has become a little more sophisticated and so they are a little bit more aware of things in the computer. So he’s having to work a little harder . . . which I think is a good thing.

In a survey that the Computer Club conducted, about one third or approximately 350 residents said that they had computers. Since the majority of the Park was not then 'wired,' computer owners had to fend for themselves regarding Internet connections.

George: [W]e're trying to encourage the Park as a whole, the administration to go to some sort of high speed service over the entire Park. Then of course the housing crisis came and the number of new residents moving in slowed and that affected capital projects. So it's sort of on the back burner at the moment. Although, of course as you mentioned, Highview Place had it when they built the building. And when they were doing renovations in Lakeside Place, they wired all of the apartments for high speed. But they have not connected it. Then of course, they were doing the sprinkler systems and all in Seawell Place and we were trying to encourage them to put in the high speed cabling then but that didn't work out.

NL: So the housing market has slowed down residents in coming because they can't sell their houses?

George: Correct. So there is a bit of an austerity program going at the moment. [chuckles] So, and I understand that.

George said that he had recently been trying to communicate to the Park residents that they could get a faster line at a lower cost by switching over from an AOL dial-up to an AT&T DSL line.

George: And with this new pricing from . . . AT&T, it does afford a good opportunity for people to move away from the dial-up. Now Comcast is the competitor to this service but they have a much faster service as their basic service. And so they have a pricing of, I think the last I saw was like \$25 a month but only for like the first six months. And then you go up to probably \$45-50. But with the [AT&T] DSL service, they can put it into like about four different plans so the lowest one, which they call DSL Lite, at only \$14.95 is sufficient for most people here.

NL: Sure. Now the original club members or founders wanted to keep everybody on the same page so it would be easier to help and they made everybody do—they highly recommended everybody do AOL. So you're saying there were still a few people—maybe not because of the original club—but who just happened to be on AOL.

George: They are on AOL and actually I encourage people to stay on AOL or to use AOL because it's simpler and the user interface typically is simpler when there is any problem. And if they go to using like Outlook Express—

NL: Oh, that's tricky.

George: And that is tricky and unless they're very skilled, if they have a glitch, a problem—. For instance, I was helping a person and their e-mail was coming out in very, very tiny print. I would say probably three or four point print. The solution—they tried a couple of people and then they called me [chuckles] sort of a last resort. The solution turned out to be that with Outlook Express—and probably Outlook—but the size of the print can be controlled by a parameter that is put into Internet Explorer, which you wouldn't think necessarily was related. But in Internet Explorer, you have a choice of text size, large, medium and small and somehow, theirs got set to small. So, I had to change that. But it wasn't an obvious thing. So I really feel like for most of the people, AOL is probably a better choice and now with the DSL, and the ability to use AOL for free, then that makes it easier.

NL: Oh, AOL is now free?

George: If you have a high-speed line. Yeah, [chuckles] they don't make it easy to find when you go to AOL but if you have a high speed line and you are using AOL, you have to go and do keyword "free AOL" and it will take you to the page and then they'll try to tell you all the good things that will happen if you pay \$11 or \$12 but it comes with no technical support, except for online but you can't call technical support. And you can no longer use dial-up as an alternative. For instance, if someone has a notebook [i.e. small laptop computer] and they travel and they want to use dial-up somewhere—. But with most places now there is an access, a high speed access. So those are the two things I make people aware of. But we have shifted a lot of people now to free AOL. And it doesn't change your e-mail address or anything.

With so many complications facing novice or even experienced computer users, I wondered how many people George had to help, in person.

NL: So how many house calls do you make? On average?

George: On average a week, probably about 3 or 4 or 5, something like that.

NL: Do you have any guidelines of what—I mean you could be doing this as a full time, all day, everyday . . . thing.

George: Well, and I have to walk a fine line between our support of the Park and ours—meaning the Computer Club [members], and not encroaching on Cody's income. But if they call me, then I'll go help them. And then, if I can't, then eventually I'll suggest they call Cody, but his pricing is per hour and it can get rather expensive.

NL: I imagine it's gone up over the years. . . .

George: Yes, it's, I think he's around \$75-80 an hour now and I talk to people who have had them come in and set up their computer and they will be there three or four hours. So they're talking about 3, 400 dollars almost. And it's a minimal setup to get them going and I tend to spend more time both explaining what I'm doing and then doing it.

NL: So typically, you will do setups, initial setups and troubleshooting?

George: Usually, not initial setups, but when they run in—it's more troubleshooting really. If they have a new computer and they don't know how to put it together, then I do the setup.

NL: So do you think the computer club has encouraged people to purchase computers and try from scratch?

George: I think they have. We're trying to make people aware that their computers are not really very tender. [chuckles] Although, they may do something that will cause it to malfunction, it's not really going to break it. Let's see, last time, I discussed using the mouse to play Solitaire or a game because that encourages people to use the mouse and it also helps with the hand/eye coordination. And when they are doing a game, they forget that they are really using the computer and so it's a good thing for training.

NL: Except some people get addicted and never leave Solitaire. [chuckles]

George: Well, that is a danger. [chuckles]

Used computers were occasionally donated to the Club/Park. The re-allocation of such equipment involved quite a bit of George's time but it seemed like a worthy endeavor, as he explained it.

George: We have had computers donated where people are replacing them and we have taken them in and sort of refurbished them and cleansed them of the personal information.

NL: "We" being you?

George: Me being me. [chuckles] I mean, I've tried to get people involved but so far it hasn't worked. . . . What we did was as people replaced their computers, they would give us their old computer and we would typically take . . . the personal data off of them and try to upgrade them to the latest release, whatever that was, for the particular operating system. And then we would add a printer. People donated money to support this and so we had basically a complete computer system with a printer and those were given to the scholarship recipients—those who are employees that needed a computer. And so we've done probably seven or eight of those. . . . I've started limiting it to systems that have Windows XP operating system, which was the latest and now of course there's Vista, but that is still questionable. So the XP operating system seems to be best and what that did was eliminate basically Windows 98. And a lot of the older computers are Windows 98. So those I felt, we really were giving them obsolete technology at that point and so those go into a recycling process with people who are willing to take them, other organizations.

NL: Where do you get the software to install XP?

George: It comes with the computer.

NL: Well, when people have donated them to you and it's a Windows 98, but you want to de-install that and reinstall—

George: Oh no, we don't upgrade the operating system. We only take what they have and then bring it up to—. Typically, what I can do is I plug into our high speed here and I will do all of the updates that Microsoft provides for that operating system. But we don't pay—. You know it would be like a little bit less than a \$100 probably to upgrade from 98 to XP and I don't know that that's really worth it.

NL: Oh, OK. So Microsoft still supports Windows 98 with upgrades?

George: They were going to drop support for '98 and the European users made such a to-do because that's what they were using. So they had to back off from that. Now I think they are still going to do it but there was some lead time.

NL: Very interesting. So the computers that the residents donate because they're getting new ones you then refurbish and provide for the staff recipients who are going to school?

George: Yes.

NL: And have gotten scholarship money through some fund here.

George: Well, there is a fund—an employee scholarship fund—and we do that not to go around the current policy where residents cannot donate directly to employees. But if we donate it to the Scholarship Committee, which in turn then gives it to the recipient, that's deemed to be an acceptable way of doing that.

NL: So, I vaguely remember that the scholarship program was for money for schooling for some of the staff or their children. But I may be misremembering on that . . .

George: I'm not sure if the children are involved—

NL:—maybe it's just the staff?

George: I think it's just the staff. But they were having difficulty getting people to apply and they were getting a lot of money donated and there was no one to give it to which is a really nice problem to have. So recently—I guess last year—they changed the requirements for eligibility for the scholarships. And so instead of having to work for two years for Flamingo Park before they were eligible, I think they cut it to one year. And there were a couple other things they changed and they got quite a few more applications.

In response to my question, George mentioned the following popular computer uses among the Park residents with whom he was familiar.

George: Word processing. A lot of people do their cards online, greeting cards and a lot of get well cards and birthday cards are distributed through the Park. So that's another big use for it. A lot of people also are doing their finances online. . . . [S]ome are doing banking. A lot of people monitor their portfolios. All of those are very good applications.

NL: And those are the primary uses that I have been hearing about all along. And that is so fascinating to me because people are going to zero on what's important for their lives, obviously—

George: Exactly.

NL:—because time is limited. There is so much more that you could do but—

George: Shopping, that's another thing.

NL: Are people shopping more online now?

George: They actually are shopping more online and part of it is probably—I don't know—but we emphasize the security in the computer club. So we have sessions on why they need the antivirus program, why they need to be careful when they are filling out anything online and this sort of thing and then Cody also does the same thing. He emphasizes how the technology works to protect them when they are going online to shop. And so we've had, I'd say probably about four sessions to emphasize the security of online shopping.

NL: And what they could look for. I know there are some sites that have the little lock.

George: Yes, you have to look for that and which also is up at the top and it says instead of 'http,' it will say 'https' which means it's a secure site. And as Cody discussed it, when they send out the credit card information and the personal information, they do it in a way that splits the information out so that anybody who might be intercepting the transmission, only gets a little bit and doesn't get enough to actually use it. So that was kind of an interesting program.

NL: Interesting and I would think—I can very lazy and say oh just let Amazon send it to me. I don't want to go anywhere or do anything. But I would think for people as they get older, this would be such an assist.

George: Yes, it really is. Yes, I mean, I know that they order clothing. They order books. They order music, well, not in the sense of iTunes. Most of them are not—although a few people are getting iPods . . .

NL: Are they?

George: They are starting to do that, yes. And so that is interesting for me but I had to get one too. [chuckles]

NL: Because you have to have every new gadget, right?

George: Right. [chuckles] In case I need to show it to them you know. It's really neat because like I was at the doctor's office this week and I took it with me because I had— on our last cruise . . . we got the DVD, which was sort of a summary of the whole cruise. And then I put [it] in my iPod so when I'm at the doctor's office, I could watch some of that. So, it worked out pretty well. But some people are starting to use it, mostly for music.

NL: . . . In our community where public television and radio are so prominent . . . you can stream . . . many of their programs and broadcasts. Have you tried that?

George: On to, you mean, the iPod or . . .

NL: Yeah.

George: Now on the computer I have done it. . . . Oh, I guess I have done that. Before our . . . cruise, I was taking Spanish classes. So I was downloading and automatically updating the iPod, I mean the Podcast in the Spanish lessons. So yeah, I was doing that. [chuckles]

What were some of the other computer uses that the Club had addressed, I asked. Because there were “quite a few people then that were doing digital photography,” the Club had had four or five sessions on digital cameras. George's co-leader was keen on free software—for income tax returns, for example—so whenever he substituted for George, he talked about that. I asked George if he was aware of anybody exploring social networks, such as My Space or Facebook.

George: Not that I know of, no. No, it's more e-mail that is a big thing. Games. Some people have played bridge to sharpen their skills and whatever. And all the typical games that are available like Solitaire, FreeCell and that sort of thing which we really do encourage because they're brain stimulation processes and so that's good. But e-mail is a big thing. Now some of them are getting pictures from their children or grandchildren and so the digital photography and the storage and all of that is coming into play.

NL: Right.

George: We have people now that are interested in Skype and that's because they have relatives or friends and usually in foreign countries. And so the cost of communication of course is dramatically decreased when they use Skype. . . . I hesitate but there is probably 10 or 12 that I know of in the Park now that are doing that.

NL: Yeah, Al was telling me about that. He is so enthused about that.

George: Yeah, right.

NL: I've known of other 'voice over internet' programs for 10 or 15 years that were hardly ever known—. Vonage was a big one . . . Is that, do you pay for it? How does that work?

George: I'm not sure if it is ad-based or not but for international calls for instance, there is no charge. Or if there is a charge for a call, it's minimal, like a penny or two cents or something a minute. But two of them [i.e. Park residents] that come to mind— one of them has a son, I believe it is, in South Africa. And so they're using Skype for their communications. There is another lady who lived in Estonia, you may know her, but she's using Skype now to communicate with people.

NL: With cameras?

George: I don't think they're using cameras. It's strictly audio right now.

NL: Has that been a subject that you've talked about in the Club?

George: We have talked about and made them aware that that's available. We haven't actually done the demonstrations yet.

The first iteration of the Computer Club was very folksy thanks to Al Swenson who loved to circulate information, news and jokes to the club members for whom he made a distribution list. Apparently the current club was doing something similar but had to discontinue it.

George: Yeah, we had a change in policy also for the Club where we were providing—I guess, you could almost call it a forwarding service—that people would have something that they thought other people would be interested in.

NL: OK, yeah.

George: They would send it to our mailing address and then we in turn would send most of them out. We had to be a little bit careful because with the non-profit status of Flamingo Park and since we're considered, the whole Computer Club now is considered to be part of the activities.

NL: Official activities.

George: Yes. So we have to be a little bit more concerned about partisan politics and then to a lesser extent but still thinking of the constituency we have. Some of the things are considered to be not appropriate to send out.

NL: Right, yeah, what kind of things would that be besides politics because people can kind of lose their perspective.

George: Sometimes it's religion, sometimes is sexually based.

NL: OK, so any of the major sensitivities that . . .

George: Right. But then that got to be such a burden.

NL: Yeah, screening that.

George: [My partner] actually was screening all of those and so we polled the Club at a couple of meetings. We sent out an e-mail and asked how critical is it to you that you get it and the answer was “not.” So we stopped that and we suggested that anybody that wanted to send out—forward an e-mail—that we have a roster for the Computer Club and includes the e-mail addresses so they can do their own forwarding if they want. . . .

NL: Do you ever take it upon yourself to—when you see something that you think would be really important for them regarding computers—. Well, there would really be so many things.

George: Typically, we don't. Although we do at the club meetings highlight—. . . . Then what we said that we no longer would be forwarding items that were sent in by people to be forwarded but we would always send out the meeting announcements and if there was a computer related subject that we might also send those out.

When the Computer Club started in 1996 and for many years thereafter, there were hardly any Apple computer owners/users who attended meetings. I asked George if he knew of any 'Mac' owners in the Park.

George: We have probably, that I know of, maybe 10 or 12 Mac users. And they can come to the meetings, certainly they can pick up some things that would be appropriate for them but we don't get very many Mac users. We do have a few that come to the meeting. And I try to sort of develop them into their own little network because I try to. . . . When I find a Mac user, then I try and make them aware of who the other Mac users are. So they can communicate.

NL: I'm thinking they should form a club. [chuckles]

George: Yeah. [chuckles] Well, a special interest group or something like that. We've tried—not necessarily with the Mac users—but there is just not enough unless you have someone that is really committed to doing it. And the problem is that right—. But I've been able to help a few of the Mac users but it is always a learning experience for me.

NL: I was going to say that I would think they would be younger people but why I think that, I don't know. [chuckles]

George: Oh [chuckles] Mac users? No, they're not in our case. They aren't. I don't know if it comes from their work or if it comes from— Many of the things that come to the residents here come through their children or their grandchildren.

NL: Right, still.

George: Yes. And often times it's a blessing for them and other times it's not. And it's the sort of thing where— and this happens very, very often in the computer industry—is where someone is using something they think it's the "greatest thing"—is what the saying is—"since sliced bread." And so they'll buy one and they'll give it to their parent or grandparent and they don't understand why they don't use it. [chuckles] I've had several instances in this consulting, helping phase where I've had to, well, essentially make the system friendly. Because you know they've dumped the system which does wonderful things and the residents want to go back to their old computer because they understand it.

NL: Exactly. Barbara is having a hard time with Vista. And I don't know if that is what you have on your computer?

George: I have one with Vista.

NL: I know PCs moderately well. . . . but I don't know Vista. And so when you add on my Macness and with the Vista, I'm not necessarily being a great help to her because I don't quite recognize stuff anyway—

George: Right.

NL: . . . [S]he had told me a good year ago that she wished that she could go back to XP. So I brought down some unopened software that I happened to have. It is from 2002 and I was going to see if with the help of Sturgis or somebody, we could de-install her Vista. . . . But it's a Dell and I've since read that sometimes you can't do that easily or readily or you would have to do this and that and the other. And anyway, we've decided that that would be maybe not warranted.

George: Yeah.

NL: Because that is a big process and then things are always coming up and I don't have that much time.

George: It might be a nightmare, really.

NL: Yeah, we're trying together, [to] kind of re-envision it but. . . .

George: Yeah, that's unfortunate. When we had to replace our computers so I got one with the Vista system because I thought I needed to start learning. And you can adapt that to where it is not difficult to use but you have to disable things so that you get back more to the XP, but that's not an easy thing to do. Then [my partner's] computer went out and so we thought he wanted an XP because he didn't want to deal with Vista and we ordered it from Dell. And they were still allowing you—See that's why I say it's unfortunate that Barbara didn't maybe know this but up until maybe a month ago or two they were going to stop providing it but you could select XP. We did for [my partner] and he is happy.

NL: Oh, Microsoft let that happen, right.

George: They had to, yeah. They didn't want to and you know that is how the discussions go, but yeah.

NL: There is a way to, under properties. . . . that you can adapt a classic look. You can change the interface so it looks more like XP.

George: Yes.

While visiting someone in the Nursing Care Center, I saw a flyer in an elevator pertaining to computers and I wanted to ask George about it. I read the flyer contents to him:

"Computers with internet access for Nursing Care Center residents, compliments of the Nursing Care Center bazaar. Now available in recreation therapy on the second floor: two mobiles available for bedside use."

NL: I was really astounded by this.

George: Yes.

NL: So that, I'm guessing, . . . would be for those who are recuperating in the Nursing Care Center after surgery and who already may be computer users—or I don't know?

George: I don't know if they do training there or not. [The NCC activities director] has been very good about providing these. The Club really hasn't been involved with that part of it. But yes, it's very nice. They've got a couple of setups and they did buy it I think with the funds from last year's bazaar.

NL: That's astounding.

George: Yeah. And they have some wireless capabilities for their mobile.

NL: So they have installed wireless over there.

George: I think so, yeah.

NL: So are you aware of this existing in any of the other residences—computer rooms or having some place where there is a computer?

George: No, not really.



Earlier in our conversation, I had asked George if he knew of any residents who used the services of eBay or other online buying/selling venues.

George: Oh, I think while we were gone [i.e. he and his partner, on vacation], I think that [my co-leader] had a session on eBay or the selling sort of thing and Cody has talked about it. I don't know how active people are as far as the selling part. But I think people do buy. . . .

NL: I myself, have never bothered with it but—. And you've got the Thrift Shop which is kind of that local service and its funds go to good things.

George: Oh absolutely, yes. . . . Well, it's like the, like the bazaar. People donate knick-knacks and jewelry and things that probably could be appropriately put onto eBay but they you know have other outlets.

NL: Right, so this bazaar, which they have advertised for November 6th, is this *the* bazaar or are there several bazaars? Because they talk about this bazaar. . . .

George: It's the same one. Yeah, they have it in November and it is two days. . . .

NL: Every year.

George: Every year and the proceeds to the Nursing Care Center. . . .

NL: So, like an upscale flea market?

George: It's basically an upscale flea market and they also have donated items from companies and they set up a little raffle.

NL: Ok, so now would you be seeing more and more electronics, people's donated digital cameras, computers or televisions or—

George: Usually not electronics. . . . It's more along the lines of services or jewelry. . . .

NL: Clothing?

George: Clothing, typically not at the bazaar. . . . Although, I noticed they are going to be selling Park ponchos and shirts. Yes, but used clothing typically goes to the Thrift Shop.

Our discussion segued to the topic of volunteerism in the Park.

NL: It has always been fascinating to me in the amount of things that the residents do. I don't know if this is unique because I don't know enough about other comparable communities.

George: Well, I know they are very proud of the ratio of residents that volunteer. It is over 500 residents that volunteer.

NL: That's half.

George: More than half, probably, well. . . . about half, right. . . . if you take into account Assisted Living and the Nursing Care Center. So they get a very nice turn out.

NL: But not only the volunteering of services, but the money raising endeavors.

George: Yes.

NL: . . . The Thrift Shop money goes to—Barbara told me that it goes to different kinds of medical equipment and somebody might suggest something.

George: Right.

NL: Yeah, it's really extraordinary.

George: Yeah, they've used the money, like the professional building for the doctor's offices that have been furnished by Thrift Shop funds.

NL: . . . As we hear and I observe, people are, Americans are volunteering less. I mean the climate has changed from my parents' generation and these folks here and the people who will be coming in eventually. I wonder how that will play out, if the whole volunteer thing will—

George: I suspect not. Just my own feeling because when you come in there is a feeling of a village. . . . [I]t is also part of the whole structure of this little micro social identity and so there is going to be peer pressure for one thing that would encourage people to volunteer. And [there are] a lot of opportunities so they can pick and choose what they want to do, but it's not like the general population.

NL: True.

George: So there is more I think, more peer pressure to be involved.

There were a couple of logistical issues about Park life that I wanted to clear up. George had told me that one had to be 62 years of age to enter the Park and I wondered if there was a maximum age. He said there was not and that he knew a woman who had moved in at 100 years of age and was doing well. He went on:

George: There are some people I know of who are maybe in their 90s and they have a place here which they don't actually live in because they still live [in a nearby town]. And this is their long-term care program. . . .

NL: So they bought it [i.e. a place in the Park] when they were still healthy and even if they are in a wheelchair by the time they move in, they have it.

George: That's right. . . . I think about the only—and I can't say this is the policy—but when we came in, the only thing they were really concerned about was any indication of dementia because I think that's—I think a high cost area.

NL: Yeah. So even if you had bought your place, but in the interim declined mentally, they could possibly refuse to take you?

George: No, once you have paid your entry fee or once actually, once you make your deposit, my understanding is that you are then eligible. So if you had a sudden decline or a stroke or whatever, you could go into the Nursing Care Center as a resident. Of course you have to pay the rest of the entrance fee. But I believe that that was one of the big selling points on if you make your deposit, then you're covered.

NL: Well, George, financially speaking, that's a good deal for them. . . .

George: It is.

NL: Because. . . your longevity is severely reduced and they have then that. . . money.

George: That's right.

NL: So, why wouldn't they? Except that, it seems to me that they are lacking in space in both Assisted Living and the Nursing Care Center.

George: Yes.

NL: They definitely need to augment those.

George: Well, that is a prime project. That's priority number one.

Before we went our separate ways, I asked George if he was still "thrilled and delighted" to be in the Park.

George: Yes we are. . . . I mean, many, many people—and when we have our Senior moments and then the standard phrase is "Well we're in the right place for that." It's a very comfortable feeling to be here, yeah.

## Epilogue

These are sample club topics from the agenda announcements sent out by George Brinkley, Club co-leader. There are also occasional informational messages. The announcements, sent out about two days prior to each meeting typically include a description of the main subject, a brief agenda and sometimes some further information gathered from various sources. The first sample shows the format of announcements; the subsequent ones are edited. Of particular interest are the May 18<sup>th</sup> mail from Cody P. and the last mail pertaining to a scholarship fund for Park staff [personal and place names have been modified for confidentiality purposes].

Date: Sun, 18 Dec 2005 15:00:49 EST

From: FPCC@aol.com

Subject: FPCC Meeting of 12/20/05

To: FPCC@aol.com

FPCC Meeting of 12/20/05

'Tis the season.

Some of us may get a new computer or an upgrade as a present from others or maybe from ourselves. If so, the first thing we should learn is how to use the word processing program so we can send out "Thank You" letters. Our meeting tonight will help you do that. We are fortunate to have [speaker's name], a club favorite, coming to give us some timely information on the use of Microsoft Word. Although he does not live in the Park he graciously comes to share his expertise with us. (Translation: He IS an outside expert.) He will be providing us with an introduction to some of the most useful features and commands of MS Word. This session can also serve as an introduction to word processing in general. So, even if you don't use MS Word you will gain insight into how to use your word processor. In previous sessions that [speaker] has given, attendees have marveled at the amount of information he is able to impart in a short time and his ability to make that information understandable. Don't miss this informative meeting!

Another reason not to miss this meeting is the raffle drawing. That's right, tonight we will be drawing the ticket that will determine who wins our club computer. As you probably know by now, proceeds will go to the Flamingo Park Employee Scholarship Fund. Our committee has been working hard to sell tickets for the raffle and, even though no goal was set for them, they have an informal goal of \$1000 to go to the Scholarship Fund. As I write this they have reported a total of \$925 in sales of tickets and contributions. I don't think that getting an additional \$75 in ticket sales and contributions is out of the question. If you agree with me, come a little early and bring a little extra cash or a blank check to the meeting. We will have one last opportunity to help the club and the Scholarship Fund. In any event I want to thank everyone that has involved themselves with the raffle. This has been a fantastic experience.

Agenda for December 20, 2005

1. Update from the Raffle Committee and the raffle drawing for the club computer.
2. [Speaker's name] will provide us with an introduction to the most useful features and commands of Microsoft Word.
3. Short question/answer session.
4. Tips, Tricks and Tidbits

Adjournment

Note: The temperature in the HT Party Room has been regulated. Hopefully, everyone will be comfortable during the meeting. If you bring a friend or neighbor we will give them a warm welcome.

George Brinkley

April 11, 06; Cody on: instructions on using email

[examples cited: send/reply/forward/attach/formatting/address book; etiquette/security; maybe copy/paste; minimize exposure to long mail lists]

July 11 06: Cody on: "viruses/spyware; verifying information in email; affect on MS of Gates departure as Chief Technologist"

July 25, 06:

This will be the first of three meetings devoted to digital photography. The background for this is that on a recent cruise I attended seminars given by a member of the Photography Department. I obtained his PowerPoint files and will use them as the basis for our meetings. I will make the presentations but will rely on knowledgeable members to add comments as necessary. Hopefully, we will be able to provide enough information for you to feel comfortable should you want to explore the world of digital photography. We will talk, in simple terms, about the technology involved in digital photography, features of the cameras that are important, some of the things to consider when taking pictures and what we can do with the pictures once they are taken. It is my hope that those already using digital cameras will get useful information and will share their experiences with all the attendees. For those not currently using digital cameras this should provide a great opportunity to learn what they are and how to use them.

As an easy path into digital photography, we will be raffling a complete bundle consisting of a Nikon Coolpix L4 camera, additional memory and a HP Photosmart 335 photo printer. Tickets for this raffle will only be sold at the Seminar sessions and the drawing will be during the last session on August 22nd. The announcement of the raffle is included in this email.

Nov. 9, 08: Cody and last meeting until Jan.

If you have ever thought that it would be easier to interact with your computer by just touching the screen rather than using a mouse or the keyboard, this program is for you. Cody will address touch screen technology for both the desktop computer and handheld devices. This technology is entering the consumer market. You probably know about the touch screen Ipods and phones. Now there is also a touch screen desktop computer for about \$1200. As the prices come down we will wonder if we want to change our computer. Come to the meeting and find out what the benefits and drawbacks are of these touch screen devices. Cody will also have some comments on the recent election.

This will be Cody's last program until January so if you have questions for him, bring them.

(Just a reminder that our Computer Club meetings are scheduled for the second Tuesday of each month from September through May at 7:00 p.m. in the Highview Place Party Room.)

12 Nov 2008

Subject: Holiday Email Virus Alert

Thanks to one of our alert . . . Computer Club member, the following is forwarded to you; it is for real. Please read the following. [etc.]

Dec. 7, 08

Tuesday's meeting will discuss portable applications. These applications have proliferated since small and inexpensive thumb or flash drives have become common. Included in the discussion will be the following:

- What portable applications are and how they differ from normal computer programs
- How to use portable applications on movable media and a computer hard drive
- Where you can find portable applications and how to set up and maintain portable applications.

(Just a reminder that our Computer Club meetings are scheduled for the second Tuesday of each month from September through May at 7:00 p.m. in the Highview Place Party Room.)

Jan. 11, 09

Bob Dylan copyrighted a song in 1963 that speaks to us today: "The Times They Are A-Changin'". (Note: I have included the lyrics below in case you want to read them.) Cody will join in the refrain for his discussion tonight. With the incoming administration talking so much about using technology to improve our economy, healthcare and infrastructure, as well as talking about their vision on changing the way Washington works, Cody will take us through a more detailed explanation of what some of these ideas are and how technology can be applied to lead us into this new era. Please note that we are planning what will be a very informative, non-political discussion on technology.

Agenda for the January 13, 2009 meeting at 7:00 p.m. in the Heritage Tower Party Room:

1. Announcements
2. Cody Peabody will discuss the role technology may play in the new administration
3. Short Question and Answer session
4. Adjournment

George Brinkley

The Times They Are A-Changin'

[song lyrics here]

Jan. 18, 09

The Computer Club meeting last Tuesday featured a talk by Cody Peabody highlighting how technology will be used in the new administration. As a follow-up to his talk, Cody sent us a link to an article on cnn.com that he thought we might enjoy. It is about other ways Obama plans to use the Internet.

Jan 22, 09

Below is a good description of a current virus/worm making the rounds. I have seen the warnings about the virus in several places but this is one of the . . . The bottom line is that if you use a USB flash drive you are at risk. Even if you do not use a USB drive you could still possibly be at risk. The defense is simple, make sure that you have updated your Windows. The best thing to do after making sure that you have the latest update is to turn on the Automatic Update feature in Windows. If you have any questions, let me know by e-mail or by calling.

Downandup/Conficker worm infects 9 million PCs <http://tech.yahoo.com/blogs/null/116396>

Judging from the complaints and questions filling my inbox, Windows security looks like it's already on track for its worst year this decade. The latest attack is a worm called Downandup, Downadup, Kido!, or Conficker (all the same thing), and it primarily seems to be being delivered via infected USB drives.

Fri 6 Feb 2009

Subject: Avoiding e-mail problems

This is a very good summary from [a Park resident]. Thank you. George Brinkley

To ALL who forward e-mails. USEFUL INFORMATION:

Most of you know this and do this, but I thought it was a good write-up on the hazards of including addresses in forwarded e-mails that you might like to pass this on. ABSOLUTELY applies to ALL of us who send E-mails. Do you really know how to forward E-

mails? 50% of us do; 50% do NOT. Do you wonder why you get viruses or junk mail? Do you hate it? Every time you forward an e-mail there is information left over from the people that got the message before you, namely their e-mail addresses. As the messages get forwarded along the list of addresses builds, and builds, and builds, and all it takes is for some poor sap to get a virus and his computer can send that virus to every e-mail address that has come across his computer. Or, someone can take all of those addresses and sell them or send junk mail to them in the hopes that you will go to the site and he will make five cents. That's right, all of that inconvenience over a nickel! How do you stop it? Well, there are two easy steps:

1) When you forward an e-mail, click forward then DELETE all of the other addresses that appear in the body of the message That's right, DELETE THEM. Highlight them and delete them, backspace them, cut them, whatever it is you know how to do It only takes a second. Sometimes you can't highlight all the other addresses at one time, you may have to individually highlight each "Original Message" section then delete.

2) Whenever you send an e-mail don't use the To: or Cc: columns for adding e-mail address. Always use the BCC: (blind carbon copy) column for listing the e-mail addresses. This way the people that you send to only see their own e-mail address. If you don't see your BCC: option click on where it says To: and your address list will appear. Highlight the address and choose BCC and that's it, it's that easy. Then send it to undisclosed recipients.

3) We all receive e-mails where you must click on the attachment and all we get is another screen to click on another attachment, and so on. Sometimes we go through several screens before we get to the actual message. To eliminate this from happening to the person you forward your e-mail to, once you come to the screen where the actual message is, "forward from that screen" DO NOT go back to the original e-mail to forward. What this does is eliminate all the in between screens you had to open to get to the message. So please, in the future, let's stop the junk mail and the viruses! Best way to beat a virus is quit feeding it email addresses! Finally, here's an idea!!! Let's send this to everyone we know. This is something that SHOULD be forwarded.

[This exact message was sent by the same Park resident in January, 2006. Since the source of her 'statistics' was not given then, they clearly cannot be regarded as reliable in 2009 either.]

February 10, 2009

We are going to talk about the many forms that documentation can take. We will use the broadest definition of "documentation." If you have ever had a question about something related to your computer but thought to yourself, "I didn't get a big User Guide with my computer and I don't know where to look for the answer," then this meeting is for you. If you have tried to use some program and it doesn't work even though you are doing just what it says in the User Guide that came with the program, then this meeting is for you. If your printer does something strange or you get an undecipherable error message, then this meeting is for you. If you just want an empathetic group to help you with a problem, then this meeting is for you. If none of the situations described above are familiar to you then this meeting is for you to pass on to others what you are doing right.

Sun 8 Mar, 2009

Cody Peabody will be with us for this meeting and will talk about Skype.

The following is from a Skype press release:

"Skype is revolutionizing the way people communicate around the world. Skype has more than 405 million registered users globally who use Skype software to communicate for free through voice and video calls as well as instant messages. Skype generates revenue through its premium offerings, such as calls made to and from landlines and mobiles, voicemail, call forwarding, and SMS. Skype is used in almost every country on Earth, and people have made more than 100 billion minutes worth of free Skype-to-Skype calls. Conversations over Skype can take place on computers, mobile devices and Skype Certified™ hardware. Skype certifies and sells hundreds of hardware products from more than 50 partners, and works with hundreds of third-party developers who have created plug-ins to extend Skype's functionality."

I know there are members that use Skype. Please come to the meeting and share your experiences. If you don't use Skype, come and find out how you might make FREE domestic or foreign calls to friends and/or relatives. When you couple FREE service with the ability to talk and even see (via the video capability) your children, grandchildren and friends no matter where they live, this is an exciting use for our computers.

Thu 19 Mar, 2009

This is sad news about one of our long-time members. Al Swenson passed away . . . . Al served us in a leadership roll for over eight years, helping to get the club started and then helping to maintain the interest and participation of the members in the club. He also continued his support effort the last 3 1/2 years. His technical background, inquiring mind and willingness to share his talents will be greatly missed. If you have memories of Al that you would like to share with us all, please send them to the club e-mail address . . .

We will combine them into one e-mail to be sent to all club members.

We hope you will join us at the memorial for Al on Tuesday, March 24th at 10:00 a.m. in the Assembly Building.

[signed by George, his partner and the club co-leader]

Tue 31 Mar, 09

Subject: Virus/Worm Alert! (again) Part 1 - "Beware Conficker worm come April 1"

We have sent out an e-mail warning about the Conficker worm before but there is some fear that there will be renewed activity related to April Fools day. The best way to avoid any problems is to make sure that you have updated Windows and that you have updated your antivirus program (sorry, Mac users, you don't get the fun of dealing with this worm). The information below [etc.]

Tue 31 Mar

Subject: Virus/Worm Alert! (again) Part 2 - "Beware Conficker worm come April 1"

Below you will find comments from Microsoft related to the Conficker worm. As was stated in Part 1, the best way to avoid any problems is to make sure that you have updated Windows and that you have updated your antivirus program.

April 12, 09

Speech recognition is, or at least somewhat is, the "holy grail of computing." For many years speech recognition has had a prominent place in science fiction. Perhaps you remember the movie from 1968 entitled "2001: A Space Odyssey" that had a computer named

HAL that could not only recognize speech and respond but could even read lips! It is so much easier in movies than in real life. In truth, the computing community has made great strides in developing speech recognition and will continue to do so. However, as users of computers, we need to modify our expectations. We still do not have “HAL” but we now have what could be called “little HAL”. By incorporating speech recognition into the Vista Operating System, Microsoft has brought speech recognition out of its infancy and we now have what we might term a developing preteen, i.e. “little HAL”. We will talk about the speech facilities in Windows XP but will concentrate on the more robust facilities in Windows Vista. As we will see from some videos, online demonstrations do not always go as planned. In spite of this, I do plan to attempt a demonstration.

May 10, 09

Cody Peabody will be with us for this meeting and will talk about social networking using the Internet. One of the websites he will discuss will be Facebook.com (his father loves it!). However, he plans to cover more than just one website. This will include how people, in general, are using the Internet to communicate and socially interact. We will be able to discuss how this is changing and/or replacing some common things like telephone usage, social clubs and, even, the neighborhood bars. As Cody says, some of these changes are not necessarily good but we will have time to discuss what is taking place.

For those that are curious about social networking, a Google search on ‘social networking’ will give you a lot to read and think about. This would be good preparation for any discussion we have at the club meeting

May 18, 09

Cody Peabody asked George to forward this message to the Club members:

From Cody:

I'm trying to come up with a "cool" but descriptive name for my new remote service. For those of you who were not at the club meeting, I'll explain it briefly.

I can now connect to your computer from my office and then we both share your computer. At that point I am will have your screen on my office computer and will see your screen just like I was looking over your shoulder. Since I will be able to see your computer screen from my office you can show me using your own mouse and keyboard what the issue is, it makes it a lot easier than trying to say I have error 0x0042395 or you have an email you can't download or, well you get the point. I will also have use of your mouse and keyboard so I can then show you how to do something or I can fix a problem you are having on the computer.

Calling it remote service just doesn't cut it. Keep in mind that I think the real plus of the new system is you don't have to explain to someone 1/2 way around the world on the phone what the problem is, you will be able to just show it to us.

I am looking to call it something that seniors would at least kind of understand just from the name. I don't want it to sound computerese. I've come up with the following ideas but your opinions or any better ideas/suggestions would be appreciated:

desktop sharing

computer sharing

2-way computer sharing

ICUC computer sharing (say it out loud)

ICwhatUC computer sharing

On the same page computer sharing

PLEASE EMAIL RESPONSES BACK TO [XXX at AOL]

Thanks, cody.

May 26, 09

[A virus alert, “UPS/Fed Ex Delivery Failure” with a link to “Snopes” to verify the danger.]

On June3, 2009, George sent out this notice to club members:

As you may know, the . . . Computer Club has a project to provide computer systems to [Flamingo Park] scholarship recipients. We currently have five systems to give them. I will have the systems in the Highview Place Party Room on . . . June 4<sup>th</sup>. Four recipients will pick them up at 11:00 a.m. If you are interested, please come. I apologize for the short notice. Many of you have contributed hardware, software and/or money to support this project. I check the systems and remove any personal data from the previous owner. Then I update the software and insure that our specifications for the system are met. [he details this] Additional software is installed including: antivirus (free AVG), Adobe Reader, OpenOffice . . . and the latest Internet Explorer. Most of the components that make up these systems are donated. If you, or one of your friends, have a useable computer system or flat panel monitor that you no longer need, I hope you will keep this project in mind and give me a call. Even partial systems or parts may be useful. Printers are most often not useful. [he details this] So, anyone who might like to support this project by donating money can do so by giving it to me for future computer systems. There are nine recipients that need computer systems. Five will get them immediately and the other four will get them as soon as they are donated and processed. Thank you for reading this. George Brinkley.

### 3. Discussion

If for no other reason than economics, the Park administration's thinking on technology was shortsighted. They were, evidently, in a financial bind due to the slowed housing market and had put their capitol development plans on hold. That included the retrospective re-wiring of Park buildings for computer access. Yet, as George, Al S. and others had pointed out, the existence of an up-to-date technology infrastructure would be a major selling point for prospective residents who were increasingly likely to be computer literate. Aside from the Highview Place lobby, there were only two small spaces that had a wireless environment. Even the computer that was stored in the Party Room was not normally available for trial use. Thus, there was no easily accessible opportunity for interested residents to experiment with a machine. More important than this economic consideration was the seeming lack of understanding by Park administrators of the role that current communication technologies could play in supporting the well-being of its population.

As George described it, there was a continuing problem for Park residents with Internet connectivity in general and with e-mail service in particular. According to him, many people outside of Highview Place (where each apartment was wired) had to be re/instructed on how to achieve a reliable and reasonably priced mail service. I wonder how many people, besides Barbara Howard, had given up on e-mail because of continuing 'glitches' and/or changes in provider service? Again, this perpetual problem could have been ameliorated if the entire Park were made wireless. The samples (in the epilogue section) of club meeting topics illustrate their scope. They were not, as George said, at the beginner's level, however interesting touch screens and talking computers may be. The club will have to cope with the continuing issue of new membership as new residents come into the Park. Whether it can be assumed that the new members will be younger and more computer literate is an open question. If, as George mentioned, potential residents could be in their nineties, 'new' does not necessarily equate with 'young.' The unusual announcement regarding Albert Swenson in March, 2009, reflects the esteem in which he was held by Park residents and acknowledges his role in the Club's history. Also reflected in these announcements (12/05 and 6/09) is the disposition of the recycled computers to the Park scholarship recipients. As these recipients were adult learners (staff/employees of the Park who were students in some kind of educational programs), one wonders what their level of computer literacy might be.

It is difficult to know how representative of the Park, as a whole, George's statements are. The Club dealt with but a fraction of those computing in the Park, if his survey accurately gauged the numbers of computer interest/use/ownership. If all of George's estimates were accurate, it must be concluded that there were many Park residents whose computer use was unknown. From the impressions I have gathered based on what I heard and saw, I find I difficult to imagine that there were 350 active computer users in the Park in 2008. But if there were that many, why were so few of them involved in the Computer Club either as learners, helpers, instructors or tutors? George agreed that there was a strong peer pressure in the Park to volunteer one's time and talents. Volunteering computer-based knowledge would seem like a relatively painless way to contribute. George apparently donated considerable amounts of his time to Club tasks; preparing topics, distributing agendas and announcements, presiding over meetings, making house calls and refurbishing donated computers. Perhaps if he were to enlist more help with those activities, he would thereby encourage and increase interest in and attendance at the Club. The complexion of the current Computer Club was different from the original Club in a number of ways. The initial attendees along with their co-leaders, Al Swenson and Don McDonald, were engaged, in the late 1990s, in an exciting—almost exotic—adventure. They were exploring a new medium which was rather mysterious. By 2008, the sense of breaking new ground was probably not the predominant one among either the Club leaders or attendees, the bulk of whom may have been intermediate users. The Club was, by then, an official Park activity which, apparently, constrained its activities. In its earliest days the Club felt informal and folksy. This no doubt had much to do with the very outgoing personalities of its co-founders, Al and Don. Group mail for which Al was the long time gatekeeper provided a sense of caring and shared stories (even though some members groaned under the weight of his textual volubility). By 2008, as George explained, the group mail had been halted. All in all it seemed that the Club had lost its sense of clubiness and become an association. What were the ramifications of this for novice computer users and/or prospective members? I theorize that it was a less inviting (in the warm and fuzzy sense) space. The experience of being a rank beginner in the presence of seasoned users is daunting. In the absence of Al's group mail with its jokes, anecdotes, words of the day, tips and queries there was less of an "us" sense. The Club was not George's 'baby' as was the case for Al and Don, and George was less 'zealous' about computers, the process of using them and sharing that with others.

Another distancing element in the Club set up was the use of a microphone by speakers at meetings. Amplified speech entails an electric 'filter' between speaker and listener that can psychologically separate the two entities. The Highview Place Party Room is smaller than that used for the Club in the Assembly Building and in neither room is amplification really necessary. Nor, as Laslo pointed out, does it help those with hearing aids but can actually interfere with the frequencies of some devices. Lastly, the large screen onto which computer images are projected was no clearer than that used in the Assembly Building. The bright whiteness of the screen resulted in washed-out images that were difficult to see. These impediments are most critical for those with vision and hearing losses who are likely to be the oldest attendees. George stated that novice computer users were discouraged from attending due to the level of topics. Whom, then, is the Club for? If, as George said, sustaining interest among the members was a problem, the Club was failing somehow to meet residents' needs. One can only speculate on possible reasons. The change in physical location might be a factor. Highview Place—a little separated from the rest of the Park—had a reputation of having a different kind of 'clientele'—richer (the living units are the most expensive) and younger. Thus, it could be that this location was off-putting compared with the Assembly Building (the previous location for the Club) which is more centrally located and much more familiar to the other residents. Perhaps the level of help and instruction in the Club is too basic *or* too advanced, too abstract, or too infrequent.

Perhaps there was a lack of consistency in leadership or a lack of bonding between members and leaders. And, perhaps, the aspect of ‘officialdom’ that had begun to surround the Club was a detraction. Ironically, as an official entity, the Club was serving as an advertisement for the Park’s now-ness. Just what was or should be the role of Cody Peabody in the Park and did his presence in the Computer Club represent a conflict of interest? Did it introduce a sense of commercialism that was counter to the (original) mission of the Club to communally support prospective and current computing? Why, for example, did the current Club leaders feel that Cody’s business should be considered a priority over residents’ needs? One wonders whether Cody’s regular lectures had become mainly a promotion for his business. The letter he forwarded to the Club member list seemed like a thinly veiled advertisement for the service he described. Why, in any case, should his income be a consideration—as George’s comment suggested—in club members helping each other?

The most popular computer uses reported by George had remained constant over a decade—e-mail, word processing, games, card making, and finance/portfolio monitoring. ‘Newer’ uses reflected an apparent greater trust in Internet security—online banking and retail buying. Although neither George nor Al nor Sturgis knew of anyone exploring social networks in the fall of 2008, that will no doubt gradually change. As happened with Al, residents’ children and grandchildren will predictably persuade them to ‘join’ their communal spaces to be able to see their photos and activities even if the elders, themselves, don’t care to post anything. Cody Peabody’s new service of desktop sharing as a way to help with Park residents’ computer problems contained the problematic issues discussed with regard to Barbara Howard and Sturgis’s connection: loss of privacy; distancing of user from her computer; and lessening of understanding of computer functioning which, in turn, leads to dependency on others.

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Norma J. Linton was born, raised and educated along the mid and north Atlantic coast for the first two decades of her life. After graduating from Douglass College of Rutgers University in 1962 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology, she spent five years working in this field in Europe. For two years in Germany and three years in Istanbul, Turkey, Linton worked as a Praktikantin caring for retarded children, as a practical nurse and occupational therapist in a psychiatric hospital, as an instructor of Psychology in a girl's college and as an instructor of English at institutes and businesses.

Following her return to the U.S., Norma J. Linton's next four decades were spent in association with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign as a scholar and researcher. She held a variety of positions—as a graduate student, residence hall counselor, teaching and research assistant, visiting instructor and independent researcher in the Departments of Anthropology and Educational Psychology, in the Survey Research Lab and on self-funded projects; as a Preservationist in the University Library and as a graduate student in the Graduate School of Library and Information Science. During these years at the University of Illinois, Linton obtained a Master of Arts degree in Anthropology (1979), and Master of Science and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in Library and Information Science (in 1997 and 2009).

Linton's research experience and interests include: the Culture and Ecology of Information and Communication; Ritual and Symbols in Contemporary American Society; Native American Cultures and Ritual Adoption; Museums and the Preservation of Material Culture; and Family Dynamics and Structures. She plans to continue researching and writing on these subjects.